



A WIDOW'S VOW

ASTER RIDGE RANCH | BOOK 3

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A Widow's Vow

Aster Ridge Ranch

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A WIDOW'S VOW

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To mom, for showing me a mother's strength.



Chapter 1



Lydia Skinner adjusted her skirts as the carriage bounced through the streets of Chicago. The vehicle's wheels showed less wear than her dress. She tried not to stare at the man across from her. Willem. Though he'd spent months in Aster Ridge, she'd never seen him so well-dressed.

Her son, Milo, whose clothes were painfully tight and worn, sat next to Willem. Milo's ankles showed above the too-small boots, and the cuffs of his second-hand jacket showed strings at the crease from too many washes. Bridget was in her arms, but at less than two years old, her small frame and Lydia's skill with a needle meant she could be dressed using fabric scraps.

Lydia turned from the pitiful sight of what a widow's money could afford and looked at the city's bustling streets. The houses were grand with impressive stonework and enormous shining door knockers. Liveried servants handed women out of shining coaches. But Lydia knew this was only a portion of the city. Somewhere, there was a slum. Every place had one, and there she would find others dressed like her and her children — with missing buttons and faded prints. People who would never get ahead in life. Drunks. Imbeciles. Widows.

Willem's voice startled her from dark thoughts. "Milo, how many inches have you grown since I left?"

"Five." Milo lied with such ease that the jittery pit in Lydia's stomach turned into a nervous laugh.

Willem laughed too and patted Milo's back. "I have an appointment with the tailor tomorrow. Will you join me? We can get you outfitted for the ceremony."

Milo reeled back, grimacing.

Willem raised a finger. "It's not that bad. They'll even give you a piece of hard candy when it's through."

Heat rose up Lydia's neck. "You don't need ..."

Willem waved away her objection. "Nonsense. Ivete is doing the same for you and Della. Even Bridget gets something new." He tickled Bridget's chin, causing her to hide a smile in Lydia's shoulder.

When the carriage pulled to a stop, Lydia drew a bolstering breath and slowly released it. Willem leaned forward, his knees brushing Lydia's. Her gaze flitted around the cabin like a bird that has flown into the house and wants desperately to flee the unfamiliar prison.

Finally, when it had looked everywhere else, her focus landed on him.

He held her gaze for a moment before he spoke, his voice deep and soothing. "You'll do great. You already know almost everyone."

She nodded, but the pounding in her ears prevented her reply. Too soon, the door opened, revealing the same liveried man who had helped them inside. Willem climbed out first, then turned to take Lydia's hand. As her feet met with stone her focus slid from his gentlemanly gesture, past his head, and up to the fourth-story windows behind him. The home was made of granite, or possibly marble, with a column façade. Intricate scrollwork framed the doors and windows.

Milo jumped out and slid his hand into Lydia's. "He lives in a castle?" He spoke with quiet reverence.

Willem stepped next to Lydia, Bridget in his arms. "If only I were a prince." He winked.

Bastien and Della's carriage arrived, and the passengers disembarked. Thomas removed his hat to look at the roofline, apparently still in awe despite the fact he'd been here six months before, asking for Ivete's hand.

Della crossed the gravel drive and stood at Lydia's side. Speaking out of the side of her mouth, she said, "I told you it's monstrous."

Lydia's gaze moved down the length of Della's dress, one she'd purchased the last time she and Bastien visited Chicago. "I'm beginning to wish I'd gone to my mother's instead."

Della linked arms with Lydia. "Nonsense. I need you here and so does Ivete."

Lydia suppressed a smile at her friend's lie. Bastien wouldn't allow Lydia to stay on the ranch alone. At the time, Chicago had sounded like a better option than returning to the hovel where she spent her childhood.

Now, she realized there was no place so uncomfortable as where one doesn't belong. Willem led the way up the steps, and Della pulled Lydia along.

Maxine and Francis waited in the entry to welcome their guests. There was a great commotion of greeting and hugs. Maxine strode to Lydia and took both her hands. "Welcome. We are so glad you're here. Will your children sleep in the nursery with Violet?"

Willem stepped behind Lydia, little Bridget resting her head on his shoulder. "I think this one could take a nap right now." Bridget lifted her head and reached for Lydia. Willem passed the child over and rubbed her back as she settled into Lydia's shoulder, thumb in her mouth.

Maxine smiled. "I'll show you to the nursery."

"Milo," Lydia called.

Her son was reaching for an old clock when her call caused him to yank his hands away and clutch them behind his back. The trio followed Maxine to a staircase.

Maxine bustled toward the nursery. “Now, we have a nurse on staff. She will sleep in the room with the children. Your room is on the same level. If there is anything she can’t sort out, you aren’t too far away.”

Lydia recalled Milo’s nightmares as of late. As they’d traveled to Chicago, he’d woken almost the entire inn before she could settle his cries. Lydia might be the one to sleep in the nursery with the children.

When Maxine opened the door, Lydia discovered three small cots lined up with one crib.

“I have to sleep with the babies?” Milo whined.

Lydia drew a breath to chide her son for his ingratitude.

Maxine cut her off when she stepped forward. “We need you to watch over the women. The nurse will be caring for the babies, but you’ll need to care for *her*.”

Milo gave her a skeptical eye, but it didn’t take long for a smile to stretch his face. “Like a knight in a castle.” He stepped back, widening his stance and putting out a hand as though holding a sword towards the window.

Maxine grinned.

“Thank you,” Lydia told her hostess before she placed Bridget on a nearby bed. Bridget rolled to her side and popped her thumb back in her mouth, her heavy lids working against the child’s will to stay awake. Lydia brushed her daughter’s face, and Bridget’s eyes stayed closed. Lydia looked around, worried about leaving Bridget to sleep alone. She might wake up and get lost in this mansion, not to be found until her tenth year.

Maxine called to a sword-fighting Milo. “The next door down the hallway is a playroom. Bastien and Willem played princes in that very room.”

Milo barreled through the door and burst into the playroom. The door bounced off the wall and echoed down the hall.

Lydia winced. “Sorry.”

Bridget cried out, reaching for Lydia with her eyes dangerously wet. Lydia stroked the child’s hair and sighed.

A young woman entered and Maxine lifted a hand in the woman’s direction. “Ah, Mary. I’m glad you’re here.”

After Maxine made the introductions, Mary sat on the other side of Bridget. Lydia eyed her from head-to-toe, trying to decide if the woman could be trusted to care for the children. The woman had a sweet face and looked to be younger than twenty. Mary returned Lydia’s scrutiny with a smile. Lydia nodded. If Maxine trusted her,

Lydia could too.

Maxine tapped Lydia on the shoulder. "Let me show you to your room. They may have brought your things up already. You can change from traveling."

Lydia sighed, hoping her things were not in her room. In fact, it would be most convenient if her trunk had fallen from the back of the carriage along the way. She eyed her dress. This was her best smock, which left her nothing better to wear.

Maxine led her down the hall, past the playroom and three more doors until she opened one on the opposite side. This room had a large bay window that bathed the room in natural light and overlooked the street.

"Oh, wonderful. Everything is here." Maxine pointed to the single trunk that held all of Lydia's things and those belonging to her children. Three lives in one compartment. "Shall I send a maid to help you dress?"

Lydia's stomach sank. "No, thank you. I'll mind the children for now."

Maxine raised her eyebrows. "Not too much. Mary is here to see to them. Chicago is different than Aster Ridge. You take this time to just be Lydia for a bit. Not Mother." Maxine gave her a pointed look.

Lydia chuckled and sat on the bed. "I'll do my best."

Maxine started to leave but stopped with an intentional glance at Lydia. "Willem has promised to be your escort these weeks. He can take you around town or lose to you at cards. Don't hesitate to ask him for anything."

She breezed from the room, leaving Lydia alone, a smudge of calico on the opulent bedspread.

She ran a hand over the lush bedding and the letter in her pocket crinkled with the movement. She tugged it free, but she didn't need to open it.

It was a reply from her mother-in-law, Roberta— if she could still call her that now that she was a widow. Lydia had written to inquire whether the Skinners would take in her and her children until Lydia could find work. Roberta's response made it clear that the children were welcome, but Lydia would "be more comfortable in her mother's home." Lydia had given a hard laugh when she read that line. Lydia thought of her bully of a step-father. Comfortable was the last thing she would be.

If Lydia understood correctly, the Skinner's expected her to send her children to be raised by grandparents as though both their parents had been in that collapsed mine, and not just one.

At first, Lydia had thought of all the harsh things she would write back. But she'd read it on the journey here, to Chicago, without any

paper or ink. Now that her rage had burned, she could accept the benefits of allowing the Skinners to help. Roberta Skinner promised schooling for Milo and a nurse for little Bridget. Both things Lydia would need to hire if she was ever going to find work for herself and quit living on the welfare of others. Though far from what Lydia had hoped it would be, the offer was too good to be trampled by Lydia's pride. She worked the inside of her cheek. They would visit the Skinners in Wyoming. If Lydia could find work quickly enough, she might set up a home where her children could live with her. Or, possibly, find a husband to support herself and her children.

Roberta's letter had mentioned Mitch O'Connell. Many in her small town had thought Lydia might marry Mitch. His family's farm bordered the town, and he had admired Lydia. Only he hadn't Simon's charms or good looks. Now though, a steady farmer who adored her was just what she needed to care for her children.

With a sigh, Lydia returned to the nursery. Bridget was sound asleep, and Mary sat nearby with a book in her hands. Lydia nodded, closing the door, and entered the playroom. Milo sat on the floor, building a castle with blocks.

She sat at the small desk and noted the large chalkboard on a nearby wall. "We will continue school on Monday."

"Aw, Mama," Milo whined.

A deep voice came from the hallway. "School's important."

Lydia spun to find a dark-haired man leaning against the doorway. His towering height and Grecian profile labeled him as Willem's brother. The Graham men were easily distinguishable as brothers. Lydia stood and curtsied.

He offered his hand. "Luc Graham. Pleased to meet you."

Lydia gave him her hand and he lifted it to his lips.

She caught her breath at such proper behavior. "Lydia Skinner."

"I've been sent to fetch you for lunch."

Lydia turned to call for Milo, but Luc pressed her hand. "The children eat in here."

"Oh." Lydia blushed at her naivete.

Luc wound her arm around his and led Lydia down the stairs where the rest of the group waited. Willem spoke to a beautiful woman with light hair and fair skin. The woman followed Willem's gaze, and her eyes ran the length of Lydia. She smiled through her scrutiny. Lydia's stomach clenched. Whoever she was narrowed her eyes, clearly irritated.

Willem reached for Lydia and wove her hand through his arm with a nod to his brother. "Thank you, Luc."

The woman took her place by Luc's side, leaning in as though claiming him.

“My wife, Angelica,” Luc said.

Angelica smiled. “You must be Lydia. I’ve heard much about you from Ivete.” Her voice sounded slightly scratchy as though she’d recently recovered from a sickness, or a cat fight.

Lydia nodded, glad for Willem’s resolute presence beside her. “Pleased to meet you.”

A weighty silence spanned between them.

Ivete’s voice rang out from across the room. “Lydia!” Ivete rushed to Lydia’s side and pulled her into her arms. “I missed you.” She spoke into Lydia’s hair.

When the two pulled apart, Ivete took Lydia’s hands. “Did Della tell you? You ladies have appointments tomorrow to be fitted for bridesmaid dresses.”

“Bridesmaids?” Lydia asked.

“Yes, they are all the rage in London. Plus, I’m buying you and Della dresses as a thank you for taking the time to come so far.”

“Oh.” Lydia pursed her lips. “I wouldn’t miss your wedding.” No matter that she was growing more and more regretful at coming. She didn’t expect such grandness. Her experience with the Graham family had been first a small mining town in Wyoming, and then a ranch in remote Montana. She knew now that was only a small stitch in the grandeur of the Grahams.

“Still. Let me spoil you just a bit.” Ivete turned to Angelica. “And you two have met? This is so wonderful.” Ivete gave a squeak of excitement and released Lydia’s hands to join her fiancé once again.

Willem spoke near Lydia’s ear. “Shall we find our seats for lunch? I’m starving.”

Lydia laughed. This, at least, hadn’t changed. “Even here? There seems to be no time when you aren’t hungry.”

“You’re right. I’ve been plagued with it since I turned fourteen.” He tugged her towards a doorway to their left.

Lydia followed his lead into a grand dining room. “You should learn to feed yourself.”

“Chef won’t allow me in his kitchen. Della either.”

Lydia chuckled. They took their seats and were shortly followed by the rest. Angelica sat next to Lydia, who forced a smile.

Servants filed into the room and filled the glasses of each guest. Francis stood. “I want to welcome everyone and thank you for your support of my daughter and her fiancé. Ivete has finally stuck with a decision, something I was beginning to doubt I would witness in this lifetime.”

Ivete scoffed but smiled wide, and the rest of the table erupted in laughter.

Francis raised his glass. “To your happiness. May it grow with

every passing year.”

“To happiness,” the guests all chorused and drank from their glasses.

Lydia set down her glass, the crystal casting a rainbow of light on the table. She’d never touched such fine glassware, and the thought of breaking such an item made her disinclined to drink anymore. She scanned the guests, all Grahams in one form or another. She’d been wrong to come. She and Ivete had grown close over their time in Aster Ridge, but not so much that she should be part of the wedding or part of this welcome meal. She’d be better off eating with the servants, wherever they were.



Chapter 2



The Graham brothers sat around a stone inlaid table, holding playing cards. Thomas, of course, was not a Graham, but his upcoming nuptials to the only Graham sister meant he'd earned a place at the table.

Luc, the eldest brother, cleared his throat, his eyes not leaving his cards as he spoke. "I've heard of the travel from the train station to Bastien's ranch." His eyes flicked to Willem for the briefest of moments. "You'll need a way to transport your guests."

Talk had been circling around Willem's work on a gentleman's ranch on Bastien's property in the Montana Territory. Willem was beginning to doubt whether he could ever outrun the stigma of being the youngest brother. He'd always been an active child, and the theatrics needed to stay in league with his elder brothers meant he got into the most trouble.

Though twenty-four and grown enough for a wife, he still occupied the seat as the youngest and, therefore, the least trustworthy when it came to business.

Luc drew a card and slid it into his hand without a flicker of emotion. "And you'll never convince a woman to move out there with you. You'll have to pluck a maid from the household or find yourself a desert flower like our Bastien here did." Luc clapped their middle brother on the shoulder.

Willem laughed. "I thought I might order myself a bride." He smirked at Bastien. "Worked for you."

Bastien's eyes were hard, leaving Willem to wonder if it was because he was losing at cards or if he didn't appreciate the conversation. "I didn't order her."

"Well, someone did." Willem returned his gaze to his cards. If he could only draw a queen, he would have a full house.

They finished their round, and Luc took all their chips, as he'd been doing all evening. He still frequented Chicago's gaming clubs, and it showed.

"You know," Luc drawled, "I've noticed that Lydia seems to weave her way around you like a cat in heat."

"Luc," Bastien growled.

"What? Can you blame her? Our Willem is the most handsome Graham. He has a sort of boyish charm, wouldn't you agree, Thomas?"

Thomas gave a noncommittal grunt and eyed his remaining chips.

Luc slid everyone's cards into one pile. "I'm just saying. She'd be good for him."

Bastien trained his eyes on Luc. "She's recently widowed. Marriage isn't on her mind."

"No?" Luc's voice was disbelieving. "How long has she been living on your hospitality? I imagine a woman on her own with a few brats would be thinking about exactly that."

Bastien's first two fingers tapped a rhythm on the table. "She doesn't need a husband. Della and I will support her for as long as she needs."

"Yes, but if Willem were to offer for her, she would no longer need your charity."

Thoughts pinged around Willem's head. Lydia was a beauty, no denying that. But he too had thought her untouchable with her husband's death so recent. The idea that she might *need* a husband never occurred to him.

Luc gathered the cards and tapped them against the table to smooth the deck. "How about a challenge you have hopes of winning?"

Willem narrowed his eyes. Luc had always been the cunning brother. The one who started the trouble but never got caught.

"You're a Graham, and this is Chicago." Luc spread his arms as though taking in the room and beyond. "You shouldn't have any trouble making this girl forget her dead husband. I've helped a woman or two forget a husband that was in the next room." He laughed, yet none of the men around him joined. Luc's laughter faded, and he glared around the table. "The west is making you all prudish." He clapped Bastien on the back. "C'mon, you and I used to own this city. Back then, a wager on a married woman wouldn't have been off-limits. This woman is *widowed*. It isn't as though she's going to stay alone for the rest of her life."

The thought that she might be ready to be courted caused the side of his mouth to lift in a smile he couldn't stop. Willem shook his head. "I know better than to wager against you."

"Merely a kiss." Luc cocked his head and lifted a finger. "If you get her to kiss you before she leaves Chicago, I will gift you a coach and team to transport your guests to and from Bastien's ranch."

Bastien scoffed and dropped his hands on the table.

The deal was preposterous. A coach and team was a far larger bet than Willem had expected. He narrowed his eyes. Could Luc truly be doing so well working for their father? Perhaps Willem should give up his foolish notion of starting a gentleman's ranch and jump in with father where the money was guaranteed. But if he did, he'd play

second string to Luc and he'd already done that enough for a lifetime. Willem leaned forward, blood pounding in his ears. "Deal."

"What?" Bastien exploded to his feet.

Willem lifted one shoulder. "What? That's a wager I'd like to win." The thought of Lydia ready to be courted made his heart thump against his ribs.

"Willem," Bastien snarled, his voice a warning like any wild beast. "Lydia is under my care and protection. I'll not have you seducing her like she's a scullery maid."

"I treated our maids very well." Willem smirked.

Luc's laughter boomed. "That's more like it. A few more months in the city, and you'll be the man I remember." Luc grinned at Bastien and Thomas. "Any other takers? I'll give you good odds."

Bastien shook his head, his ears red with anger. "I'm going to bed." He stood and placed a hand on Willem's shoulder. Giving it a not-so-gentle squeeze. "Tread lightly, brother."

He walked out the door. Willem leaned in and narrowed his eyes at Luc, "What if I lose?"



LYDIA WATCHED THE CITY through the carriage window as she listened to the excited chatter between the women. She smiled when expected, but her mind was on Roberta's letter, on how she would reply.

The carriage pulled to a stop, and Ivete, the bride-to-be, led the women into the dressmaker's shop. They passed the counter and a wall filled with bolts of shining satins and textured lace. The taffeta was so crisp Lydia could cut a square and use it to write her reply to Roberta. With a gulp, she pushed away the thought. She'd allowed Roberta's words to consume her mind the last three days. With a bit of perseverance, she could dispel her doubts and focus on being happy for her dear friend.

When they reached the back of the shop, a maid commanded them to dress down to their undergarments without care for modesty.

Della, Lydia's best friend in the world, leaned in and muttered, "I guess they assume we've all already seen one another." She hitched her voice higher. "Ivete, will you try on your wedding dress? Your mother and Angelica have raved such that I do not think I can wait a moment longer."

Ivete's eyes sparkled. "Not yet. Today isn't about me. We're fitting you ladies for both bridesmaid dresses and another dress of your choice as my gift to you."

Women with measuring tapes bustled into the room, each taking a member of the wedding party in hand.

Angelica suffered the pushing and prodding as if she were a dressmaker's mannequin, doing as told with a faraway look in her eyes. "Speaking of gifts. You will love mine, Ivete. Or, rather ... Thomas will."

Ivete's eyes sparkled. "Oh, will he?" She lowered her voice, though the workers could hear every word. "I tell you, it was wise for Mother and Father to call me back before the wedding. I don't think even Bastien's diligent efforts could have held me back much longer."

Maxine clapped her hands. "Ladies, this is not the place. Ivete already knows far more than she needs. Let us allow Thomas a chance to deliver a few lessons of his own." She cast a coquettish look at Ivete.

Ivete gasped, "Mother!" Then burst into giggles.

The rest of the women followed suit.

Angelica turned to Lydia and asked through her laughter, "Did your husband give you a lecture on *your* wedding night?"

Lydia wiped tears of mirth from her eyes. "Much to my parent's chagrin, he taught me everything long before we wed."

Ivete and Della laughed even harder when Angelica lifted her thin fingers to her lips, her eyes wide.

Della leaned forward so she could see Angelica. "Lydia here had Milo when she was only sixteen."

Angelica ran her eyes down Lydia's frame. "I thought you merely looked young for your age. Why, you're only two years older than me! To think, I could have a child almost as old as your Milo."

"You'll have a few soon enough." Ivete's voice was soft. Lydia watched the exchange and wondered if Angelica and Luc were struggling to conceive. They'd not been married long. Not even two years. Yet, that was a bit of a wait for a woman who wanted a child.

Darkness crossed Angelica's face for just a moment, but it was gone before Lydia could even be sure she'd seen it. Lydia raised a brow at the woman's ability, wishing she could possess such grace.

The rest of the morning was spent looking at fabric and dress designs. Lydia tried to choose something that would work for both here and the ranch, but Della stopped her. "I've already ordered us some readymades from a gal I used the last time I was in Chicago. Get something beautiful to please Ivete while we are here. She will love seeing us all dolled up at her expense."

Lydia's stomach twisted at the thought of such a dress—something she needed yet couldn't afford. She'd been living off the Graham's charity for nine months already, and now Della had taken it upon herself to maintain Lydia's wardrobe. "Della, you know I can't pay you back."

"I do know, and I wouldn't accept it if you could. They are gifts."

Lydia snuffed out her insecurities and squeezed her friend's hand. "Thank you."

Della held Lydia's gaze for a moment before giving a sharp nod and turning back to the fabric. "Now, I think you would look stunning in the green with the ivory lace."

"Oh no, the lace is too much."

Ivete stepped forward. "Too much? Darling, this is my treat. Father is sparing no expense. You'll have a dress made entirely of lace if that is your wish."

Lydia laughed at the idea. "A lace collar is just fine."

Angelica fingered the material. "And the cuffs." She moved on to a textured fabric that matched the green taffeta. And this along the hem and waistline." She eyed Lydia's waist. "You're still so tiny even after children. My mother tells me I'll lose my figure."

Della smiled. "She's truly a wonder. I have yet to return to my old size and am beginning to wonder if I ever will."

Ivete took Lydia and Angelica's hands, creating a circle of women as though they were witches preparing for a seance. She leaned in and whispered, "Soon, I will be pregnant, and we will all have little ones running around together."

Lydia smiled, but a weight settled in her chest. Unless she remarried, she'd never be pregnant again, never have another babe to hold close as these women would. She was young enough to bear more children and might yet find herself a man. She looked at every one of the women around her. Sisters by law. She stepped back, out of their circle. She didn't belong. As generous as the Grahams' were, she couldn't live on their charity indefinitely.

Marriage would take her away. She glanced around the circle of women, preemptively mourning their loss. These past months had cut and shaped her, much like the material being fashioned for their dresses. Grief had shaped her into someone new. She only hoped when she tried out the new her, she wouldn't require alterations.

She sighed. Marriage was truly the solution. If she didn't marry, she might lose her children to their grandmother. She stared at her reflection. Was she still capable of catching a man? Would Mitch O'Connell think she was such a prize now? Or had grief and motherhood scrubbed her clean of the girl he had admired?



Chapter 3



After the dress fitting, Della and Lydia watched the carriage leave for the manor. It would return for them at the store that made what Della called ready-made dresses.

In the store, a woman with the fairest skin Lydia had ever seen greeted them. Her golden eyes were like a falcon's and were just as unnerving when they landed on Lydia. Her gaze rolled down Lydia's frame. Her scrutiny was as sharp as Angelica's but with none of the loathing.

The dressmaker spoke. "You're quite tall. I'll not need to take yours up." She turned to Della. "I had your measurements from the last time, but I'd like to see you both in them to be sure."

They were ushered into single dressing rooms, divided by swaths of cloth. Lydia spoke through the thick material. "I thought you said these were ready-made."

Della's voice came from the other side. "They are. She doesn't fix much, just hem and sleeves as needed."

A sigh escaped from Lydia's chest. First dresses from Ivete, now dresses from Della. The gifts were all too much. These were things a woman like Lydia would never be able to pay back.

Della slid the curtain open and glared at Lydia. "Don't you sigh at me. This is nothing compared to what I endured on my first trip here."

Lydia smiled, remembering the letter Della had sent an eternity ago. It told of rich folks and side-eyes. "Yes, well, you're a Graham. You would have had to face your fate eventually. I, on the other hand, will have nowhere to wear the dresses Ivete ordered."

Della released the curtain, returning Lydia to her privacy. "It's not a waste, and if it were, you could find comfort knowing Francis does not mind. I daresay the patriarch of this family likes to see his women set up. We are all a credit to him, even you."

"You make it sound as though we are dolls."

Della was silent for a beat. "I'm not sure what we mean to him, but he is a proud man and would be shamed if a member of his household, family or not, were dressed outside of fashion."

The dressmaker tugged the curtain open and gestured for Lydia to spin while casting a critical eye over the dark red dress. "Your waist is too small, but the color brings out the richness of your eyes."

Lydia blinked, trying to imagine how a red dress would

compliment brown eyes.

Della stepped out of her stall. The dress was the same as Lydia's but in a deep blue. The material was a quality cotton that would wear well back home, but new, it was also fit for the glittering lights of Chicago.

"I did tell you." Della glanced from Lydia's waist to the dressmaker as she finished the last of the buttons on her jacket.

The woman's eyes flicked to Della, who didn't flinch at their sharp scrutiny. "You may take everything but the jacket. It will not suit until I have tailored it." She stepped closer to Lydia and gestured for her to remove the offensive garment. Turning it inside out, she slid it back on Lydia and pulled pins from a small cushion on her wrist. She tugged at the loose material, and when she was finished, the jacket fit better than anything Lydia owned.

"You may come for this tomorrow." She gave Della a nod, obviously aware of who to thank for the business.

"Thank you." Della nodded. "I will pay you for your extra effort."

The woman nodded, as though she expected such payment.

They exited the store in their new dresses. Once outside, Lydia linked her arm with Della's. "I cannot believe you returned to her shop. That woman is frightening."

Della laughed. "She doesn't bite. Would you like to walk a bit? We can meet the carriage at the end of the street. There are plenty of shops."

After conveying their plans to the coachman, the two women picked their way through several small stores along the street front. By the time they reached the end, Della had hired a shop boy to carry several boxes of items she'd collected.

Della smiled. "Willem will need to do much of the same when he opens his ranch. I doubt he has thought of things like linens for the beds or servingware. No doubt he expects I will take care of it."

"He does tend to get whatever he wants." Lydia laughed, thinking of the many times he knocked on her door and helped himself to food from her kitchen. His lighthearted presence and the way her children adored him made his visits most welcome, even if she was short on produce afterward. She supposed someone like him would have never considered that food wasn't free. Living on the Grahams' hospitality meant Lydia hadn't paid for any of the food herself. Had she, she might have had to turn Willem and his large appetite away.

When the carriage came into view, Lydia spotted Willem speaking with the coachman. The man let out a guffaw, and Willem slapped him on the back, a broad smile on his face as well. The coachman caught sight of the women and straightened his posture, tugging the wrinkles from his vest. He came forward and accepted the packages

from the shop boy. Willem, too, approached and, with a word of thanks, slid a coin into the boy's hand.

Willem turned to Della and Lydia. "You two look lovely. How were the shops?"

"Lydia and I were just considering the many things *you* will need to buy when you've finished your bunkhouse."

Willem waved away the thought. "That's a long way off. For now, I'm focusing on drumming up interest. I've had several who wish to invest." He rubbed his hands together like a villain from one of Ivete's novels.

Della smirked at Lydia. "I hope your interested guests don't mind sleeping on a wooden bunk with no mattress or bedding."

Willem laughed and opened the carriage door. When both women were inside, he leaned in, holding the doorway with his hands. "You know, word is out about how good the food is in Aster Ridge."

Della adjusted her skirts on the bench. "No doubt you're the one spreading such rumors."

Willem shot his sister-in-law one of his winning smiles but avoided answering. "Where to? More shopping?"

"The manor, please," Della said.

Willem conveyed their destination to the coachman before folding himself inside. With him came the smell of cigar smoke. Lydia had never seen him smoking at Aster Ridge, and she wondered whether it was a habit he only indulged in the city, or possibly the odor came from his time spent in drawing rooms selling time on his ranch.

The carriage lurched forward, and Lydia sucked in a breath, reaching for a handhold.

Willem caught her hand and smiled. "Is Avery such a poor driver?"

"No." Lydia's cheeks heated. "It is only, without seeing the horses, I don't know how to expect their movement."

She slid her hand from his warm grip and set it on her new skirt. Her discomfort regarding Della's gift eased with her confidence in wearing something bright and new instead of faded and fraying. While she would never belong in such a place, if she could dress the part, the next ten days of playacting would be easier. Once they reached Aster Ridge, she could be herself once more. A sharp memory of her bed at Aster Ridge flooded her mind. The many nights she'd cried herself to sleep. During those times when she'd not been able to sob quietly enough, a knowing Milo would climb in and hold her until sleep came.

"In Chicago," Willem said, "one must stay tense and ready for all things, both seen and unseen."

Lydia blinked away the tears that loomed and swallowed the emotion threatening to rise up into her speech. Best to leave bad

memories in the past. “That sounds exhausting.” She hoped the smile on her face would give the impression that laughter, not sadness, put a wobble in her voice.

Willem’s laugh filled the cab and did wonders for the darkness between Lydia’s ribs. “It certainly is. Why do you think the Grahams are fleeing Chicago in favor of the wilds of Montana? Even Luc is considering returning with us.”

Lydia forced her mouth into a smile. The idea of Luc and Angelica coming to Aster Ridge shattered her dreams of return. Despite the loneliness she’d felt there, it was home now. Bastien and Della were almost family, and compared to the foreign streets of Chicago, Aster Ridge called to her with its warm kitchen and blue skies. Luc and Angelica’s presence would steal all the comfort from the place, and Lydia would feel like a rag doll placed on a shelf near a delicate porcelain creation.



WILLEM ACTED AS A FOOTMAN at the manor house, handing first Della, then Lydia from the cab and onto the pebbled drive. Instead of releasing Lydia, he placed her hand on his arm and led her up the walk. He watched her, trying to discern what had changed since he’d left Aster Ridge. Her eyes were distant, and unless someone spoke to her, her mouth was pinched as tight as a closed bloom. He tried not to credit himself for her healing, but he couldn’t help but recall that he’d left her in Aster Ridge with a smile on those rose-colored lips. Something had happened in his absence that had countered that joy. Maybe if he’d never left, she might still wear a genuine smile, one not given in pretense. He longed to stamp out whatever darkness prevented her from enjoying her life, her time in Chicago.

This city didn’t bring joy for him either. Rather, it brought failure to meet expectation, and sibling rivalry. He cursed his pride for allowing Luc to get under his skin last night. As though losing money to Luc wasn’t enough, now he must be resigned to his end of the bet, a bet he wouldn’t dream of pursuing. Now Willem was committed to his losing end of the bet — to give attention to all of Angelica’s friends— all of whom he wouldn’t be good enough for. They were young, yet they would expect to enter into a household as financially secure as the one they’d be leaving. And why shouldn’t they? Luc had managed to set himself up to care for Angelica. His family was right, he wasn’t ready for marriage. He should have thought of becoming financially independent long ago. He shook his head. No matter. He wasn’t looking to marry anytime soon anyway. He glanced at Lydia, if that were true why did the thought of her receiving suitors cause his heart to give a steady thump?

When they entered the house, Maxine appeared. "You're back then." She smiled at them all and turned to Lydia. "You'll be looking for the little ones, I'm sure. They're in the yard."

"I'll take you to them." Willem tugged her tighter onto his arm and set off for the back of the house.

When they reached the yard, the servant playing with the children stopped and stood at attention. Milo beamed and bolted to Willem and Lydia, stopping just before them to show Willem a palm-sized leather ball.

Willem held out his hand, and Milo tossed it to him.

Willem kneeled so his face was level with Milo's. "This is from my uncle Geoffrey. He lives way east, all the way to the ocean, and they play a game called baseball. Has Richards here been teaching you?"

Milo's eyes sparkled. "He taught me to throw."

Willem stood and gestured for Milo to back away. "Let's see what you've learned."

The two tossed the ball back and forth. Eventually, Willem convinced Richards to join, and the three had a small game until Bridget ran to Willem, crying until he picked her up. He tucked her under his arm and ran around the yard, earning himself full belly laughs from the child. He set her down by her mother and sprawled on the grass as though defeated.

Milo ran over. "C'mon, Mr. Graham."

Lydia waved her son away. "Not now. I think you've killed the poor man. Let him rest."

Milo ran off to inflict his incessant need for play on Richards. Willem rolled onto his side and propped himself up on his elbow. "You think me finished, huh?"

Lydia smiled, the light reaching her eyes in a rare way. He recalled the day she arrived at Aster Ridge, the sadness that encapsulated her had been like some beast reaching its long arms out to swipe at anyone who came too close. From the moment he handed her down from the wagon in Aster Ridge, he'd wanted to lift that burden, to make her laugh. Their months together on Bastien's ranch had turned this stranger into a friend, and drawing one of these infrequent smiles fulfilled him in a way no business endeavor ever could.

He rolled onto his back with a sigh. If only making Lydia smile could also bring him money. Hard work he didn't mind, but business was as drab as playing cards with aunt Avis. Even his grand schemes for the gentleman's ranch in Montana were truly another adventure. Somewhere he could escape to leave the responsibilities and seriousness of Chicago behind and wrestle with Milo or attempt to lasso a calf. Yet, if Luc was right, Lydia and Milo might not always be at the ranch. A woman as young and beautiful as Lydia would surely

find herself a husband. Willem had been a fool to overlook her practical needs. He turned his head to watch her select a grape from the basket of foods and pop it in her mouth.

She grinned at him as she chewed. "You look peaked. This Chicago air has undone all your hard work in Montana."

Willem dropped his jaw in mock indignation. "You are saying I've gone soft around the middle. That is most improper." He slapped a hand against his stomach, hard from his labors in Aster Ridge and kept conditioned by daily rides on his fine new mount.

He adored Lydia's impropriety. It was a welcome reprieve from Angelica's constant attempts to find a match for Willem. Word was, Angelica wanted a sister in the family who wouldn't flee to Montana and leave her here alone. Willem was her last chance.

Lydia's voice dropped to a whisper, "I am most improper in all the ways of Chicago society. I will have the clothing soon, but I fear the façade will not be enough."

Her smile disappeared, replaced by the line that appeared between her brows when she was deep in thought. Willem's hand twitched. He longed to press his thumb to the spot and smooth it away, to bring her whatever comfort she required. Had Luc's words about her needing a husband really changed so much for him, or would he have felt this way on his own?

He gripped the grass beneath his hand, reminding himself to keep to his place. "I'm sorry if my words caused you heartache. You are perfectly suited to Chicago society. Why would you think you are not?"

Lydia looked at him sidelong as though his question were a foolish one. When he remained silent, she spoke. "Angelica is a wonder, and Ivete too. She has transformed since returning. Or perhaps just shed her Montana buckskin and returned to her old self."

"She is quite a priss here, isn't she?" Willem recalled his sister gutting fish and scrubbing laundry in Montana. Lydia had never seen Ivete outside that environment. He could imagine Lydia's shock at the change.

"Not at all. Ivete has been most kind. It is not that anyone has been anything but well-mannered. It's just ..."

"That they are so danged well-mannered."

Lydia laughed again, the line between her brows disappearing. Willem smiled too. If he couldn't touch her, at least he had the wit to soothe her worries.

Lydia picked at a loose string on her skirt. Willem hadn't noticed her clothing being drab in Montana, but out here, in Chicago, amongst all the wealth, she was right. Yesterday she stood out in her plain dress, and today she blended right into the scenery. One more

beautiful maid in Chicago, like the many Angelica traipsed before him over the last three months. And yet, none of them held Willem's affection as Lydia did. Like Bastien, he felt a sense of duty to this woman, so hurt by her husband's death. Willem watched the spring blossoms overhead dance on their branches. If only he could make a business out of drawing a smile from the curious bloom before him.

She frowned. "I'll be glad when the wedding is done, and I can return to where I belong."

Bridget left her mother's lap and climbed onto Willem as though he were a horse. He rolled onto his stomach and lifted onto all fours. Before he turned away, he said, "I hope you can enjoy your time here for what it is. It is not home, but it isn't without people who care greatly for you."

As he crawled off with Bridget on his back, he realized he didn't want Lydia to leave, at least not without him. Ready for marriage or not, he preferred her company and her children to anyone in Chicago. He would be glad to return to Aster Ridge. One more reason setting up his gentleman's ranch was the best sort of business endeavor.



Chapter 4



After dinner, the men settled in the drawing room with liquor in their hands.

Luc sidled up to Willem. “Any luck with your widow?”

Willem’s eyes flashed to Bastien, engaged in conversation with their father. “Be mindful. Bastien will not appreciate your scheming.”

Luc laughed and sipped from his glass. “Like Bastien’s desert rose, yours blooms with a bit of finery.”

Willem recalled Lydia in a new dress at dinner. She was as beautiful as she ever was, only her face had been flushed in conversation with Angelica.

“You did not hesitate to tell her so. I do wonder, does not your wife mind you complimenting others in such a way?”

“Angelica knows her worth is far greater than some wench from the west.”

Willem curled his hand into a fist. His muscles and body bunched and he lurched toward Luc.

A strong hand patted Willem’s shoulder, knocking him back into his chair before he’d fully stood. The interruption was just what he needed to calm the urge to punch his brother.

The hand lifted off and Thomas rounded the chair. “Willem. Luc.” He settled in a nearby chair and his easy smile brought Willem’s boiling blood to a simmer.



“MA’AM,” A VOICE CALLED from the darkness. Lydia untangled herself from the sheets and sat up. “Ma’am, Milo be needing you.”

Lydia threw on the dressing robe that hung on the wall near her bed and followed the maid. The moment she stepped beyond the doorway, she heard her son’s cries and quickened her pace.

When she reached the nursery, Milo sat up in bed, his face streaked with tears. He and Violet were both crying.

Lydia rushed to her son and pulled him into her arms, and Mary did the same for Violet. “Shh, you’ve woken the babe.” She rocked him. “Did you have a nightmare?”

Milo nodded through a few hiccups as his cries subsided. Milo’s nightmares had started shortly after his father’s death. They’d eased

for a time but had started up again in recent months.

Lydia spoke softly into his ear. "Was it your pa again?"

Milo drew a shuddering breath and nodded against her neck. "He was under the rocks. It was so dark."

Lydia's chest tightened as she struggled to draw breath. Her face quivered with the urge to cry, but she spoke with a firm tone. "Your pa is not hurting. He is with the Lord now and looking down on us."

Though the mine workers had unburied Simon and provided a burial, there was no way to know how quickly he had died after being pinned to the earth. Lydia wondered if part of the reason Milo had these nightmares was because Lydia could never comfort his worries with much gusto. She, too, feared Simon had faced a nightmarish death.

Thank goodness her son couldn't see her thoughts. He relaxed into her embrace, blissfully oblivious to his mother's shared fears. Lydia settled him back onto his pillow and wiped the wetness from his cheeks. She lay down beside him, her hand on his chest. "Remember when Bridget fell today, and you ran right to her?"

Milo hiccuped and nodded.

"You were watching out for your sister. Actions like that make me proud, and I know your pa sees it and is proud of you as well."

"I miss him."

Lydia squeezed her eyes tight. "Me too." Her voice sounded thick with the unshed tears she pressed back. She tightened her embrace. Milo reminded her of Simon in so many ways. Holding him was like having a little piece of Simon back in her arms.

The ache of Simon's death was lessening, but the grief over what her children lost was a beast of another kind. That pain was one she could never chase away.



A MAID HELPED LYDIA into the dress Della had bought. She wondered if she would ever be able to wear it without a twinge of guilt. Lydia couldn't live on their generosity forever. After Simon's death, she'd thought through all the living options. Her family, Simon's family, alone. Then Bastien had come and presented her with the most comfortable of options. A place of her own next to their main house.

She glanced at the letter which lay on the bedside table. She was stronger now, recovered. If she was going to be a burden to anyone, it should be family.

On her way to breakfast, she took a detour into the library where there was a desk with ink and paper. She sat and wrote quickly.

Roberta,

I appreciate your offer for the children. Having lost their father, I feel they are not yet recovered enough to be without their mother. A visit would be appropriate, so you might meet your granddaughter. I will see to the arrangements and send word.

Best,

Lydia

She stared at the words, a bitter taste on her tongue at the thought of returning to that town. The Skinners were one of the wealthier families in the area who boasted of their connection to a governor cousin. Could their shared loss of Simon quell Roberta's old hatred? Or would Roberta's heart be smaller still, and any need to accept Lydia buried along with Simon?

Lydia chewed her lip as she thought of how to accept Roberta's offer without losing her children. She could endure living with her mother and step-father while the children lived with the Skinners. Only, it was not an arrangement she'd like to last more than a few weeks.

With a deep breath, she folded the letter and carried it down to the breakfast table.

Only Willem remained at the table. He stood at her arrival with a hopeful smile. "Are you ready for visits today?"

Lydia stood near the buffet table. "I suppose. But I don't understand why we must. I don't know these people."

Willem laughed and handed her an empty breakfast plate. "As part of the bride's family, you're important. You, we, are all sort of a greeting committee to entertain the other guests the week before."

"I'm sorry I'm late." She passed her letter to Willem. "Would you mind posting this today?"

"Certainly." He searched her face with curious eyes.

"I do have others in my life who aren't Grahams," she teased.

Willem pocketed the letter. "Just so long as you remember that we are your favorites."

Lydia's fingers jerked with the urge to snatch the letter back. Now that she'd started the process of delivery, she wasn't so sure of her plan.

Willem pulled out a chair. "Let's get you fed then be on our way."

He dished her enormous portions, and when she finished, the corset on her new dress pinched her sides.

Willem offered her an arm and led her to a carriage. "You look lovely. I'm beginning to wonder if I will ever see you in the same dress

again.”

Lydia chuckled. “Unfortunately, this isn’t the last one. You’ve now seen the two Della bought, and Ivete ordered two more that are so fancy I don’t know when I will ever wear them again. One is the bridesmaid dress, and the other I’m to wear at the banquet.” She shook her head at the frivolous spending and the garish color of the bridesmaid dress.

“I’ll make it a personal mission to find you an excuse to wear them each again.” Willem tapped the roof, alerting their driver they were ready, and the carriage lurched forward.

When they stopped at the post office, Willem left Lydia in the carriage as he posted her letter.

He returned with guarded eyes. “To the Skinners in Wyoming?”

Lydia heaved a sigh, wishing she could stop the roiling in her stomach. “Yes. Simon’s family.” She smiled at the ability to say his name without pain in her chest. If only Milo could heal as quickly. He seemed fine in the day, but at night he lost control. The nights had always been the worst for Lydia, too. Something about the darkness smothered all hope like a bottle of ink spilled across a page. Her son wore a brave face during the day, but those nightmares better represented the healing of his heart.

“Are you inviting them to Aster Ridge?” Willem’s voice was deep and grounding. Milo might never have a nightmare if someone like Willem were around.

She considered his question and snorted at the possibility of inviting Roberta to stay. Asking them to Aster Ridge could worsen matters. They might never let her live on their charity if they knew the wealth she currently enjoyed.

“I thought I might visit them.” And remember where she came from. Where she belonged.

Simon had raised her up from poverty. Now she rode in a gilt carriage, wearing fine clothes and speaking with a rich and handsome man. No. If the Skinner’s ever knew how lucky she was, they would never feel inclined to help her or her children.

“You’ll not be staying, though. Just a visit?”

Lydia’s eyes flashed to him. His lighthearted manner had allowed her to forget how sharp he was. “Willem, you must know I cannot live on Della and Bastien’s charity forever.”

“Of course, you can. Your friendship brings Della much joy, and Bastien does not need that guest house. Once my bunkhouse is finished, there will be more beds than he would ever need.”

Lydia shook her head. Willem would never know what it was to be a nuisance. Staying with a friend for a visit was one thing, needing them for survival was another.

“I’ll not depend on them for much longer. When I first arrived, I was ...” Rain tapped at the carriage, chasing away the words she couldn’t find.

Willem moved to sit next to her. He took her hand between both of his, his eyes wide and kind. “I’m sorry I pressed. You need not talk about it.”

Lydia smiled at him. “I don’t mind. My grief was such that I wasn’t thinking clearly. Now I realize I am not their responsibility, that burden should fall to family.”

“But not your own family? Why Simon’s?”

Lydia blew through her lips. This was a story she hadn’t intended to tell. “My step-father is not a good man. I would not bring my children into his house.”

With her hand in his as they sat on the plush carriage cushions, Lydia could almost believe there was something else in store for her. Someone who might love not only her children but also her. The carriage stopped, and Lydia slid her hand from Willem’s grip.



RAIN LASHED THE CARRIAGE as thoughts of Lydia’s step-father lashed Willem’s mind. Had he hurt her? Willem glanced at her profile as she looked out at the rain-soaked city. If he had hurt her, she wouldn’t tell him. She was shut tight, refusing to let him in.

The downpour quashed his plans to show her the city. Willem snorted. “You’d think they called it The Windy City for its weather. ‘Tis not the day to explore. If we go home, Ivete will give us some assignment.”

Lydia laughed. “Assignments are the very reason I am here.” Her laughter was warm, and it filled Willem’s chest with a deep contentment. He may not be the quickest with business, but he could bring this woman happiness.

Willem waved her away. “We’ve completed our visits for the day. Ivete does not wish to work her *guests* to death, only her brothers.” Willem tipped his head onto the cushion behind, trying to think of something indoors for them to do. His stomach twinged, and he raised an eyebrow at Lydia. “I have an idea. There will be food, and we’ll be doing a favor for dear Della.” He poked his head out into the downpour and spoke to the poor soul who was leading the carriage.

When the rig stopped, Willem and Lydia braced and rushed from one cover to another. Willem yanked the shop door open and stepped in after Lydia. When he closed the door, he was close enough for her hair to brush his chin. Before he looked up, his name was called in greeting. A young girl rushed around the counter and stopped short of throwing herself into Willem’s arms. Instead, she bobbed a curtsy.

Willem placed a hand on Lydia's back. "Lydia, this is my good friend Edna Archer."

She curtsied again. "Pleased to meet ye, ma'am."

Round Mrs. Archer came from the back of the shop, her face splitting into a smile. "I heard ye were in town. Took ye long enough to find yer way here." Willem smiled to hear her familiar, lilting Irish trill.

She found her way next to her daughter and placed her hands on her hips. Her eyebrows raised as though waiting for an introduction.

Edna volunteered. "This is his lady friend, Lydia."

Willem finished. "And this is Mrs. Archer. Makes the best pastries in all of Chicago."

Mrs. Archer waved her dishrag at him. "Come on back. I'm sure ye'll be wanting whatever is left. Edna, lock up. We'll have no more to sell once this one is through with us."

Willem laughed at Lydia's scowl and took her hand to tug her after Mrs. Archer and into the back of the bakery. He'd not wanted to release her hand in the carriage. It was as though she had laid brick around her and refused to let anyone, even Della, past her walls. Well, Willem wasn't going to let her put up anything more. He would break those walls down brick by brick.

When Mrs. Archer stopped, Willem said, "I've not come to eat all your stock. I wondered if you have any Kouign Amann left? Our dear Della is also in the city for the wedding."

"I like that one." The woman smiled. Willem recalled the day he'd fulfilled Della's dream of trying a Kouign Amann. "How many would ye like?"

Willem looked at Lydia. Her wide eyes told him she hadn't a clue what he was speaking of. "Quit scowling at me. It's a dessert pastry. How many would you like?"

She shrugged. "One."

Edna had returned from locking the front and Willem nodded. "Seven, if you have them."

Mrs. Archer jerked her chin at her daughter. "Edna, see what we have."

Edna disappeared to the front of the store, and Mrs. Archer folded her arms. "Do ye wish to see the books?"

Willem's eyes slid to Lydia and back. He hoped she wouldn't interpret their visit as him trying to put on airs. "No. My banker tells me you're running a fine business."

Mrs. Archer turned her sharp gaze on Lydia. "Your man here is a gent, to be sure. Kept me and my Edna from the poor house when my husband went to the grave."

Lydia beamed at him, her brows knit as though he had saved the

Archer's very lives.

Willem rushed to correct the misconception. "Nonsense, your skills have brought you here."

Mrs. Archer nodded at him and pulled a rag from where it was tucked into her apron string. "And your money." She wiped flour from the counter and Willem could see she had been cleaning before they arrived. The bakery kept early hours. Rising long before dawn and closing mid-day.

Edna returned with a filled paper sack. Her eyes crinkled as she smiled at Willem. "We had seven exactly."

He took the bag from her. "Thank you."

Edna smiled shyly then returned to the front.

Willem looked at Mrs. Archer. "She's growing up."

Mrs. Archer blew hair from her damp face, her eyes rolling heavenward. "Yes. And into a beauty, I'm afraid. I never had such endowments to speak of. I told her she best use 'em now. Such fine features can't last forever." Her eyes flicked to Lydia. "At least not in us common folk."

Lydia laughed. "I'm common, too. Don't let my new dress and this gentleman fool you. In fact, I wonder if I might beg a sourdough starter off you."

Mrs. Archer gave Lydia one of her genuine smiles, and Willem didn't resent it for one moment. He hoped a successful shop meant Mrs. Archer put her feet up every once and a while.

Mrs. Archer straightened, showing pride at Lydia's request. "I'd be glad to give ye some. Would ye like to see Ms. Ivete's cake? 'Tis not complete, but it is started."

Lydia followed Mrs. Archer through the door that led to their private apartment.

Willem reached into the bag and bit into one of the pastries. He closed his eyes. Though the pastry wasn't warm, the sugary layers still melted when they touched his tongue. When he'd eaten all of it, he rolled the bag closed, as though a paper barrier could stop him from eating any more.

The women returned, and the silence filled with warm compliments from Lydia. He listened, wondering what he could do to earn such admiration from her.

Her gaze found Willem's. "Mrs. Archer says I should fear Chef, and she'll not give me any starter until we leave for Montana."

Willem laughed. "I fear him too." He offered his arm. "Shall we brave the elements once more and deliver our goods to Della?"

Lydia smiled and took his arm. They thanked the Archer women and dashed through the storm to the carriage.

"Will the rain never stop?" Lydia asked.

“If I were Zeus, I would command a spot of sunshine to lend its glow wherever you were.”

Lydia scoffed and turned her attention out the window. She leaned against the frame, as far from Willem as possible in the tight carriage. Luc was wrong, she didn’t see him in a romantic way. Would her grief always keep her from regarding other men in a romantic light? Or was it Willem who she’d never see that way? As the carriage bounced along the cobbled streets, he closed his eyes and tried to think of how long a woman waited after the passing of a husband. Surely Lydia did not plan to live the remainder of her life alone.

When they pulled into the drive, the head butler came out with a large umbrella and led Lydia, then Willem, into the house under its wide cover. Willem and Lydia made for the drawing room and asked that Bastien and Della be invited there as well. A maid brought plates and tea, and they settled in to enjoy their treats.

The truth came out that Bastien had already brought Della a Kouign Amann on their first day here.

Bastien laughed, “Of course I did. Do you think me such a poor husband?”

“I think *me* such a fine brother as to remember these things.”

“Yes, well, go and find yourself a woman to bestow dreams. I am already fulfilling the dreams of my own wife and need no assistance from you.”

Willem laughed. “Pray, forgive me, brother.” In his laughter, he glanced at Lydia.

She sat still, her lips pressed together. Her pastry rested half-eaten on her plate.

Willem knit his brows. “Dear Lydia, is the pastry not to your satisfaction? Maybe if you try it hot from the oven. I’ll rise with the sun tomorrow and fetch one for you.”

“It is wonderful.” She took a large bite as though to prove her point and gave him a smile through her chewing.

The door swung open and Luc and Angelica swept into the room. “We heard this was where the young folk were gathering.” Luc stepped forward and rang the bell for more tea. “Are those pastries from Mrs. Archer?”

Willem kicked the paper sack under his chair as the pair found their seats. Lydia tilted her head to the side, her eyes wide. Willem pressed his lips tight and minutely shook his head. She smirked and nodded and Willem had to keep the relieved smile from his face.

Luc turned to Willem. “My old friend Wilkinson is most interested in your endeavor. Will you allow him on the list for your first group?”

Willem leaned back in the chair and spread his arm along the back. “I guess so. Does he know we are not yet running? This first visit is

bound to be filled with kinks and disasters.”

“He is counting on it. He’s recently returned from the army and craves a bit of adventure.”

“We’d love to have him. Have you decided whether you’ll join us?”

Angelica’s brows drew together for an instant before her usual serene face returned.

“I will go. Father can manage without me for a few weeks.” He turned and placed a hand on his wife’s knee. “What say you, Angelica, will you come with me to the wild west?”

She practically shuddered. “No, thank you. Just hearing stories is enough adventure for me. But will you be back in time for the Burnham ball?”

Luc waved away her concern. “Father can take you if I am not returned.”

Angelica nodded, her smile forced. Willem knew Angelica nearly as well as he knew his own sister. Growing up, he’d not been prejudiced as to whose hair to pull or which one to tease. He watched her now, studying the paintings on the walls as though she’d not seen them countless times. Had Luc’s disregard for the upcoming ball hurt her? He glanced around their party. Lydia and Della were discussing the sourdough starter from Mrs. Archer. Of course, Angelica couldn’t join in that conversation. And how did that feel? To have stayed in Chicago, unchanged, while the rest of the family flocked to Montana?

Luc cleared his throat. “You might hire that Archer girl for your ranch. No doubt she has all her mother’s skill, and she’ll soon be old enough.”

Willem eyed his brother. The man felt the need to bed any woman who took his fancy. Edna was too young yet, but a comment like that made Willem wonder if Luc already had his sights set on the girl. Could that be what plagued Angelica? Was Luc careless in his dallying?

Willem’s gaze slid to Bastien and Della. Theirs was the happiest marriage he’d seen. Would Angelica have been happier with Bastien? All the family had been shocked when she chose their elder brother. Soon though, the choice made sense. Bastien wasn’t a city boy, while Luc wore charm like a well-tailored suit.

His gaze fell on Lydia, who looked every bit the city girl. Her hair was pulled up and her waist cinched by a corset. Yet, when she laughed, she didn’t hold back the way Angelica did. Did he imagine it, or had she smiled more today than she had since she’d arrived?



Chapter 5



THE men gathered in the circle drive at the front of the house. Luc rode his horse to Thomas's side. "Are you sure you wouldn't rather a day at the club? Fine drink and gambling. You don't need to partake of any of the women, but I tell you they are splendid to look at."

Thomas set his chin. "I'd rather keep in Ivete's good graces."

Willem clapped Thomas on the shoulder. "I believe our dear sister has threatened death if he goes anywhere near a club."

Thomas laughed, but Willem knew his comment to be partly true. Ivete would never forgive him if he crossed the same line as her last fiancé.

Once Francis arrived, the men set off to the tracks. Luc's face was sullen. Likely, he'd rather be at his club dining on the women.

Willem nudged his brother. "Surely you're too busy to attend these clubs during the day. And doesn't Angelica keep you busy in the evenings?"

Luc rubbed the back of his neck. "You know nothing of marriage, of the stress that comes with caring for a family. Angelica is sufficient, only... I need a time away from it all, where I can forget I am married and saddled with responsibilities."

Willem bit the inside of his cheek. He may not understand about marriage, but he didn't approve of his brother's solution. Like all the Graham boys, Willem had been introduced to the clubs when he became old enough. But he was poor at cards, and the women frightened him. He never found the pleasure that his brothers did. More than once, his father had to bail him out of his gambling debts. Now he was so close to coming into his inheritance, he didn't go near the place. He would rather gamble on something like the Gentleman's Ranch than lose at cards with a lusty woman hanging on his arm.

Once they arrived at the tracks, Thomas's eyes began to sparkle. The man loved horses, and the idea of finding a stallion to start his breeding business was enough to make him laugh like a schoolgirl.

Even Willem, no expert in horses, could see how fine they were.

Francis led the way, stopping at a stall with a tall chestnut horse. "He's injured, but eighteen hands. So long as he doesn't fall ill due to his injury." Francis switched his gaze from the horse to Thomas.

The stable master came around the corner and introductions were exchanged. Since the Graham's owned a box at the track, the

stablemaster knew Francis well. When the group discussed the injury, the stable master pet the horse's nose, agreeing that while the horse should recover physically, the owners were concerned about the animal's mental recovery.

"They say he lived to race. Even now, they don't dare remove him from his stables. Too soft if you ask me. He was a good mount which held a fine record. But if he can't race, they'd best not be paying the cost of a stall at the track." He gestured the men further along the line. Luc and Bastien stayed back, their heads close in conversation.

The stablemaster slapped his hand on a half door that revealed a fine mount. "I have this one here, which I know is for sale."

The horse was just as tall and black as coal. "Young, big, just didn't up to the task of racing. Owners are a might frustrated with 'im. Told me to sell to the highest bidder." The man's attention flicked to Francis for a moment before returning to the stallion.

Francis clapped Thomas on the shoulder. "What do you say? My gift on your wedding day. Do you want him?"

Thomas gave a nervous laugh. "Want him, certainly. But I can't let you..."

"Nonsense. I got all my boys a gift on their wedding day. Do you like him?"

Thomas laughed again. "Of course. He's a fine mount, but—"

"It's decided then." Francis walked away before Thomas could further object.

Willem stepped between Thomas and his new stallion. "Welcome to the family."

Thomas's mouth hung agape.

Willem raised an eyebrow. "Didn't I tell you the gifts would start soon?"

Thomas shook his head. "This will make all the difference for Ivete and me. She's talked of these races and the prospect of breeding for racing."

"Would you like to see the sire for the mount I'll be bringing back to Aster Ridge?"

Thomas nodded, and Willem led the way. "Just a quick peek, then we'll get you home and married before Father takes his generous gift back."



THE VANITIES FROM EACH woman's room had been moved into Maxine's spacious room. They each had a table and mirror in which to get ready. Maids zipped in and out, fetching one thing after another, while others pinned and curled the ladies' hair.

Lydia stared into the mirror while the maid did her hair. She had

only to shift her eyes to the left to see the reflection of Angelica who had readied at her own home. She sat at her vanity, watching the rest of the women. The dresses Ivete ordered were all the same in style, but different in color. Angelica's was a pink that, while bright, was softened by layers of chiffon. The feminine color set off the perfect glow in her high cheekbones.

Lydia tried not to be jealous of the woman's perfection. Instead, she shifted so Angelica was no longer in her peripheral vision and scrutinized her own reflection. She'd been pretty once. Maybe never in Angelica's way, but when she was young, more men than Simon vied for her affection. She closed her eyes, trying to push away the bitterness that his absence brought. She missed him, certainly, but what was more, she *needed* him, and he was gone. She couldn't make it on her own. She imagined returning to Wyoming, separating from her children and finding work. She imagined being courted by the same pool of men, as though her years with Simon had never happened. It was a miserable plan.

She couldn't inhabit Della's guesthouse forever. She had no other options. She had to live on *someone's* charity. There was nothing she could do for herself while caring for two young children. If only Della would allow her to be their live-in maid, she might eke out a living until her children were grown.

"You're so serious."

Lydia jumped, her hand flying to her racing heart. "Della!"

Della laughed, "Sorry, I didn't mean to scare you. Do you not like your hair?"

The maid had been tugging and pulling on Lydia's hair. In the end, her scalp ached, but the coif was beautiful. "I love it. I shouldn't be so serious." She drew a breath and hoped she succeeded in wiping the trouble from her face.

Della's eyes flashed to Ivete before she moved closer to Lydia. "Will you be okay to go through this day?"

Her friend's care warmed Lydia, but the Grahams' assumption she was always mourning, always a breath away from tears was like a shawl around her neck on a hot day. With Bastien losing his good friend, the want to reminisce was often. At first, Lydia loved to speak of Simon. It was both painful and healing, like slicing off the dead flesh of a laceration. As she recovered, speaking too often of her late husband opened the wound instead of healing it.

It was as though Bastien didn't want her to forget. As if he expected her to be sad. As if her happiness betrayed Simon's memory. It made her wonder if she wasn't sad enough. Should she be happy as she was? The weight of Simon's loss lessened every day, and the guilt that came with that lessening grew with every thoughtful word from

Bastien or Della.

Lydia squeezed Della's hand. "Absolutely. I'm thrilled for Ivete and Thomas. Being here for their event is just ... spectacular." It was. Seeing the way these people lived, waking in a feather bed, seeing the bustling city, it was like a dream.

Della laughed and turned back to her mirror. "The Grahams don't do anything halfway. Maxine was none too pleased with me for marrying Bastien without fanfare."

Maxine cut in. "We did our best to celebrate after the fact. Only, with your family situation being what it is, I wish I'd had the opportunity to treat you like my own daughter. Angelica had her own family and their traditions to honor."

Ivete turned in her seat. "You can still hold out for Willem. He may marry a traditionless woman."

The group laughed at her classification.

Della smiled affectionately at Maxine. "I didn't expect such a strong bond with you. The women in my life before you ... well, the relationship was one of survival, not enrichment. And the way Bastien seemed to want to flee this city made me believe his reasons were familial. Now I see how wrong I was."

The adoring smile Maxine gave her daughter-in-law made Lydia want to cry. If she'd had such a relationship with her own mother-in-law, the idea of visiting them might not be so wrought with misgiving.

Once everyone's hair was smoothed and pinned to perfection, the women were strapped into their gowns. Della's was a soft yellow. The chiffon, so similar to Angelica's dress, made Della look like a dandelion in bloom. The layers of material fanned out like rows of petals.

Lydia stepped into her skirt, a reddish-orange which she'd never worn before now. Ivete had told her it was the color of a California poppy. Lydia had never been that far west, nor seen such a flower.

Ivete adjusted Lydia's sleeves while the maid tugged the corset tighter. "Don't make such a face. This color suits you, and it's not a common color like you'll find at those ready-made shops."

Lydia couldn't hide her embarrassment at wearing such a garish shade. "I fear I am rather ready-made."

"Oh, hush." Ivete's eyes danced with her soft reprimand. "If Henry Burnham wasn't already married, I think he might have picked you himself." She glanced at Angelica. "Too bad you've no brothers for our Lydia. I wonder if we might keep her in the family."

Angelica's eyes ran over the length of Lydia's gown. Lydia felt cold where the woman's gaze touched. Angelica likely possessed no desire for Lydia to stay in the family.

She spoke, her voice sweet and proper. "Lydia will have to be my

next project. First, I must deliver on promises I have made before you arrived. Willem is the man of the day. Everyone is thrilled at his return, and I must say he has lost some of his cushion being out at the ranch. He is hard as any cowboy in one of your books.”

She referred to Ivete’s cowboy dime-store novels. Her brothers teased her endlessly about them, something Lydia doubted would ever stop, especially not now she’d married one of those cowboys.

Ivete stood. “Willem is far from ready to settle down. He has his ranch to start, and he’s not yet found himself.” She clapped her hands. “One more thing before we head down and get to work.” She gestured to her maid, who approached with a stack of small black boxes, and Ivete passed one to each bridesmaid.

The bride-to-be waved her hands. “Go on, open them.”

Lydia obeyed, finding a gold chain with a massive drop pearl in the center. The maid who did Lydia’s hair offered to help her into the fine necklace.

Ivete smiled at each of them. “I chose a pearl because through our flaws, and after trials, we are shined and perfected, ready to feel our full measure in this world.”

Della and Lydia hugged and thanked Ivete.

Della linked her arm with Lydia’s, and tugged her into the hallway and toward the stairs. “Unlike Angelica, I have no projects to take my attention from you. I like Ivete’s plan to keep you in the family, yet ... I would not have you marry into Angelica’s family. I’d rather keep you in mine. Speaking of my family, how fine do our escorts look?”

Lydia lifted her gaze, and her breath hitched in her throat. Willem stood the same height as his brother, both tall men with the same Graham jawline, yet Willem wore his trademark smirk. Lydia pressed a hand to her stomach as it churned with unacknowledged feelings. The sooner she left Chicago, the better. Much longer, and she might start to believe her façade, might grow attached to the idea that she belonged here, that someone like Willem might choose himself a bride like Lydia.



Chapter 6



Willem adjusted the cuffs on his tuxedo while he and Bastien waited at the bottom of the stairs to escort Della and Lydia to the wedding ceremony.

“Why are you nervous?” Bastien’s voice was hard and his elbow sharp.

Willem cleared his throat. “Who said I’m nervous? Just making sure I look my best for my little sister.”

“I’ll not warn you again.” Bastien’s eyes flicked to the door to mother’s room where the ladies gathered, his meaning clear.

Willem tugged on the hem of his jacket, eyeing his getup. Hopefully Lydia would find him a suitable partner for the day. He smirked at Bastien. “No need, brother. No need.”

The very moment the words left his mouth, a flash of color at the top of the stairs caught his attention. When he saw her fully, the smile was stolen from his face. Lydia stood at the top of the stairs, looking every bit the woman of a great house. Angelica breezed past Lydia and descended the stairs to claim Luc. Della followed, and finally Lydia made her way toward him. She descended slowly with a firm hold on the railing. Her eyes darted around the space, looking anywhere but at Willem. When she took his arm, she kept her gaze down and licked her lips. Willem let out a sigh, wishing he had the words to tell this woman she did not need to look downcast. He tried to think what Luc would say. Instead, he hooked his finger under her chin and raised her face to his. “You are beautiful, Mrs. Skinner.”

She let out a breathy laugh and flicked her gaze to the ceiling as though she didn’t believe his words. As he turned to follow his brothers, he leaned in and whispered, “Do you think we have time to stop by the kitchen?”

Lydia laughed and tugged him toward the carriage. “Chef might injure anyone who disrupted his work this day.”

Willem chuckled and handed her into the carriage. Luc and Angelica waited inside. Bastien and Della loaded themselves into the carriage with Thomas. Luc smiled at Lydia and Angelica’s mouth pinched into a hard line.

Luc ran his gaze over Lydia’s curves. “Lydia, darling. You look every bit the Chicago socialite. Add a bit of money, and all the men will be fighting for your affection. They haven’t yet been able to

replace my dear wife.”

Angelica swatted at him in mock indignation. “Oh.” She huffed, but her features softened at the compliment. Willem shook his head. His brother needed no more than a small string of words to manipulate his wife. Angelica turned to Willem. “Now, Willem. I know you are to accompany dear Lydia, but Luc is right. She will have no trouble finding partners. You must allow me to arrange dances between you and just a few of my friends.”

Luc guffawed. “A few? Will, she’s promised you to half of Chicago. I’m shocked we haven’t been receiving bribes all week. Word of your ranch has made its way not only to all the men’s ears but also the women’s. They know you’ll be independent soon enough.”

Willem scoffed at the insinuation he must have the funds for a wife before he is considered his own man. “I am independent already.”

“Yes, well, you’ll need a bit more before they consider—how did Thomas say it— hitching their wagon to yours.”

The fabric of Lydia’s dress rustled as she buried her hands into the material.

Willem lifted his hand to place it over Lydia’s fidgeting one but stopped before their hands touched. He scrubbed his face instead. “I’m afraid my endeavor is far from being profitable. I’m sure none of your ladies are inclined to join me in the Montana Territory for the next few years.”

“By George!” Luc exclaimed. “You don’t intend to stay that long, do you? No lady will commit to that. I’m still unsure if Ivete will go through with *this* marriage.” He shook his head. “Trading her life of leisure and wealth for one of hard work ... if she were my daughter, I might lock her in an asylum.”

“Luc!” Angelica gaped at her husband. “Don’t say such things. If anyone heard you.” Her eyes darted around as though there were someone near to hear his dangerous words. Willem snorted. Angelica’s indignation was likely not for her friend but for the scandal even a hint of insanity in the family would bring.

He turned to Lydia. “You are most lovely. Luc is correct. Your dance card will be filled so fast, you’ll not need to dance with me more than once this evening.” He tried to pretend to be happy for her. Instead, his mind swirled with excuses as to why he should prevent such an occurrence. Possibly, his mother could expect him to fill Lydia’s card. Lydia didn’t know anyone outside the Graham family, and she might be more comfortable spending the night in his arms instead of a stranger’s.

Her face pinched, and she kept the grimace the rest of the way to the church. Perhaps her small-town upbringing made her worried about the attention of so many men. He determined to keep his eyes

on her during the banquet. He hadn't lied. She was sure to have partners aplenty. What he was worried about was how many of them would sense her innocence and take advantage. A laugh threatened to spill out of him. After all, she was a mother of two, not some young and impressionable maid.

Nevertheless, the men in Chicago had charms that might fool even a woman as sharp as Lydia. His fingers tightened around his hat's brim. He remembered Luc's words about her needing a husband to support herself and her children. If she felt any sort of desperation, were their silver-tongues even more of a threat? As far as Willem could tell, she had no resources of her own. If he'd possessed a mind for business and finances like Luc, he might have come to this realization sooner. The corners of his mouth pulled down. Everyone was right when they said he wasn't ready for marriage. It wasn't just lack of independence that was key, he also didn't have the knowledge or understanding to care for anyone but himself.

Once the carriage lurched to a stop, Luc and Willem exited the cab. Angelica was first out, followed by Lydia. Angelica paled in comparison with Lydia's olive skin and bright orange dress. Willem tucked her arm under his and drew her to the church's open doors.

He leaned in, speaking so only she could hear his words. "That dress is very much your color."

Lydia glanced at the fabric. "Ivete tells me so, yet I have never worn something so vibrant." She let out a soft laugh. "And so ridiculous. I'll never be able to wear it again. Can you imagine me gathering eggs in such frippery?"

He forced himself to keep his eyes on her face and not run them the length of her frame. "I don't wear my tuxedo to the ranch. Just because it can't be worn every day doesn't mean it isn't appropriate today, or that it doesn't suit you to perfection."

Color bloomed in her cheeks and Willem turned away to not embarrass her further. He couldn't keep the slight smile from his face as he led her to line up along the steps. The pairs stood in order of birth. Luc and Angelica would enter first, followed by Bastien and Della, and next Willem and Lydia. His father's carriage arrived, and Francis helped Maxine, then Ivete, to the ground.

Willem smiled at his sister. She had always been lovely, but on this day, she was radiant. As his gaze swept the wedding party, he realized she'd chosen the colors of a sunset. Instead of a white dress as so many of the wealthy chose these days, Ivete's dress was a pale peach that reminded him of a sunrise. The black of the men's tuxedos might be a backlit mountain against the sky.

Mrs. Neumann, the minister's wife poked her head out the doors. "Thomas is ready and waiting." Her eyes settled on Ivete, and she

stopped speaking. Her head fell to the side. The woman had known each of the Graham children since their birth. "Stunning." Music floated out from the doors and she shook from some reverie. "Maxine, let me show you to your seat." Mrs. Neumann turned to Luc. "When the waltz turns into a canon, they'll open the doors for you to enter."

He gave her a curt nod as Maxine walked past and the doors clicked closed. The group waited on the stairs, and Willem's heart thudded in an unnatural rhythm.

Lydia lifted her gaze to his. "Are you nervous, dear companion?"

"Aren't you?" He shuffled his feet, unsure what made his heart stutter.

Her smile suggested she took pleasure in his discomfort. "I know none of these people. If I fall in these heels, I will have no need to face the crowd after today."

Willem lowered his brows and narrowed his eyes at the beauty on his arm. "Yes, well, you might wish for some attention come this evening. If your card is not full, I'll have to fill in every spot."

She looked away and inhaled a long breath. "I think you are not the only one who would dread such an occurrence. For the sake of everyone, I will try my hardest to keep my footing."

Willem's chest clenched at his bungled words. "Lydia, that's not—"

The doors opened and an usher nodded at them through the crack.

Unspoken curses fought to get out from between Willem's lips as their procession moved forward. There was no time to correct the mistake. He followed Bastien inside and parted ways with Lydia. The women stood on one side of the dais and the men on the other. He should be admiring his sister as she walked down the aisle, but he couldn't take his eyes from Lydia or shake the words she'd spoken about not wanting him to fill her dance card. Why had he pretended? As he watched her now, he knew that was all he wanted; to hold her in his arms and never see another man so much as look her way. He almost laughed. What claim had he on her? None. He was merely her host for the duration of her stay in Chicago. He had every reason to be thoughtful of how she would spend her time this evening, but he should feel nothing ill regarding any honorable man claiming her attention.

Certainly, if she had any need for a partner, he would be there for her. But her words gave him pause. If he hadn't misspoken, would she have wanted to dance with him? Did she want to, even now? Or had he ruined any chance with his fool words? Willem set his jaw and focused on Thomas and Ivete. There was much reason to celebrate this day. If only he could cast these doubts from his mind.



Chapter 7



After the ceremony, the Graham family shuttled their guests to the mansion to enjoy a banquet where it was standing room only. Servants filtered through the dining area with shiny silver platters that held bite-sized hors d'oeuvres and drinks. Those same delicacies adorned a large table against the wall.

Della had introduced her around, but had been stolen away by Angelica. Now Lydia stood in the great hall, surveying the banquet. She'd not seen Willem since the carriage ride and she couldn't help but recall how his stare had heated her face as she stood on the other side of the dais. He seemed to want to speak about what she'd said before the doors opened, yet now he was nowhere in sight. Her hard words had chased him away. Her mother always called her stubborn and proud, said it would get her into trouble. Without him by her side, she was more certain than ever that she was out of place.

She cast about, searching for Della when she noticed an older gentleman wrap his arm around the waist of a young female servant. As he tugged her in to do more than take a glass from her tray, the girl struggled to maintain an appropriate distance whilst keeping the drinks upright, an extraordinary feat given the height of the flutes she carried.

"Who are you scowling at?" Willem's voice tickled her ear.

She jumped and shrank away. "Oh, it's you." She let out a breath of relief and focused on the older man again. The servant had disappeared. "Your parents have skilled maids. They can both brush off unwanted affection *and* keep the guests supplied with drinks." Lydia straightened her back, no longer alone and out of place. It seemed she fit in wherever Willem was.

Willem smiled and tried to follow her gaze. "Who needs to be taught a lesson?"

Lydia giggled and cupped a hand pointing behind it so only Willem would see. "That old man."

Willem laughed out loud. "Uncle Robert, the rogue. I'll be disinherited, but if a lesson is what he needs ..." Willem walked toward the man.

Lydia caught Willem's elbow, pulling him to a stop. "Stop." She laughed.

He spun to face her, a wide smile on his face.

She glanced at the man. He was well dressed, but he didn't look to be any wealthier than anyone else at the party. "You're inheriting from him?"

"All of us are. Mother is a favorite of her uncle's, and therefore, her children are, too."

Lydia shook her head. The sheer amount of money these people had was dizzying. Over the last week, she'd accompanied Willem as he drummed up interest in his ranch. With the money they possessed, there was no way his endeavor wouldn't succeed. His connections with so many rich men meant even one visit would make him more money than Simon had made in a year. She shifted, she was a long way from Kirwin, Wyoming. Further even, from being a pregnant sixteen year old, bullied by her step-father. Could she really go back to that life?

While Willem watched his uncle, Lydia watched him. His tuxedo was as fine as her dress. He was every bit the Chicago elite. Yet, when he was in Aster Ridge, he could saw wood alongside Thomas and Bastien. He was born to money, but he seemed natural in a rougher world, too. "Is what you said earlier true? You're really going to spend just a few years in Aster Ridge? Then what will you do?"

He shrugged, sliding his attention from the crowd and focusing on Lydia. He didn't just meet her eyes. His gaze took in all of her from her toes to the question in her eyes. Her stomach fluttered. She should have grown used to his attention these past days as his companion. The endless carriage rides to meet with someone or other meant they had ample time in one another's company. This newfound companionship soothed an ache inside her, a balm she hadn't realized she needed. Her stomach had never flipped this way when she and Willem had spoken in Aster Ridge. Was it the city, or was it him? Was he different here? Was she? She didn't feel any different, but she could not ignore the confidence fine clothes gave her, the heady allure of a pretty gown that pulled her into a fairy tale.

The corner of his mouth lifted on one side. "You, too, spoke of leaving. Will you stay months or only weeks?"

The words immediately dampened Lydia's fine mood. She'd been trying to pretend she was just another maid at a ball. She'd had plenty of attention from men, and Della had introduced her to several guests. Yet, Willem's words placed her reality in front of all those ideals. Upstairs, being tended by a borrowed maid, she had two children and no means to provide for them.

"I will be leaving before harvest," she said. "To deliver the children to their grandmother for a visit. I will stay with my own mother." If she returned home in time for harvest when the need for work was great, she might find work to last through the winter as well. "I don't

know when I'll return to Aster Ridge." The thought pressed on Lydia like she was standing under a waterfall.

Willem pulled his head back. "Surely you won't stay separately from Milo and Bridget."

"Not all families are as close as yours. Roberta always disliked me for her son. Now I expect she doesn't like me for her grandchildren as well."

Willem's eyes darkened. "You should not go."

Lydia tried not to scowl at him. He would never understand desperation. "I'll not remain a burden to your brother and Della. Roberta will look after my children while I find work."

The music in the hall changed and grew louder. Willem reached up and brushed his thumb across her brow. "I did not mean to ruin a lovely evening with burdensome conversation. I'm sure you do not wish to think of such things right now. Please, forget my impudence and grant me this first dance."

Her forehead burned where he'd just touched her. Was she truly so starved for a man's touch, that a friendly brush on her forehead turned her heart upside down? "Of course." She took his raised arm and let him lead her to the center of the room.

When they found their place, he looked at her with concern. "Now, you'll just need to follow along. I'll lead, and we'll go as slow as you need. If we're out of tempo, so be it."

Lydia smirked. *He thinks I can't dance.* Whatever gave him that impression? As the music filled the room, Willem led her around the floor. He must have decided she could keep up easily enough, and soon they kept time with the rest of the dancers. When the song ended, he led her from the floor. His face was flushed and beaming. They'd stopped walking, but he still held her hand.

She slid it from his warm grip with not a little regret and gave him a teasing smile. "You thought I could not dance."

Willem laughed and took two drinks from a passing servant. He handed one to Lydia. "You are correct. I only thought so because you looked so troubled when we spoke of dancing earlier."

Lydia recalled the carriage ride. "You were proclaiming your hope to not be forced to dance with me the entire evening."

Willem scoffed and spluttered. "I never said such a thing. You—"

"Willem, darling." Angelica appeared at his side, a young beauty in tow. "This is my dear friend ..."

The young beauty looked through her eyelashes at Willem as she arched her slender neck. She tittered in the type of voice that had never had to yell at a child to stop climbing on that. This woman was the exact kind Willem would marry. Should marry. Likely, she'd never labored a day in her life. Never felt the sting of grief. She was as

sunny and innocent as Willem and as rich, too.

Lydia clenched her drink and made for the doors. The evening was chilly and instead of going outside, merely standing at the open doors cooled Lydia and her emotions.

A deep voice drawled from behind her, "My wife has set herself to a task this evening." *Luc.*

Lydia composed her face from any disappointment and turned to face him with a smile. "She is a thoughtful sister to Willem."

Luc snorted. "Her intentions are entirely selfish. She would like to handpick her last sister." He took a long drink from his glass and set it aside. "I cannot blame her. She is an only child, and I do not understand the loneliness of such a life. Alas, I spent much of my life trying to be rid of my siblings."

"And now?"

He smiled, and his eyes sparkled. There were many similarities between the Graham brothers, yet Luc's smile wasn't as light or teasing as Willem's. He lifted a shoulder. "Now I appreciate them and the adventures they bring." His gaze flicked down and back up, and Lydia had the distinct impression that when he said "adventures," he meant her. "My family is turning out to be quite the anomaly."

Lydia shifted under his scrutiny. "I think they are wonderful." She had thought more than once how she envied Della her in-laws. It wasn't even the wealth but the relationships they had with one another. If she'd known the trouble Roberta would give her, would Lydia have chosen another beau instead of Simon? A small smile stretched across her face at the memory of Simon, the most ambitious of her suitors. She liked to think she would have chosen differently had she known she would be left alone in the end.

"They? Am I not included in the family you speak of?"

Lydia's eyes widened as she realized her misspeak. She stuttered to find the words to correct her meaning.

Luc laughed. "You need not apologize. Only finish your drink and allow me to have this next dance."

"I'm afraid I ..." Lydia fumbled with her dance card, trying to find who she was due to dance with next.

Luc snatched it from her hands. "Family of the bride gets first claim on beautiful women. No doubt some bloke will wish to crush my skull. Have you *any* open slots?" He lifted the card and scowled at the entries. "Ah, yes. Mr. Wilkinson is next. He is a friend of mine and can have your eighth slot." He pocketed her card and pulled her onto the floor. His grip was not tentative like Willem's. He held her firmly, too close for propriety. Lydia searched the dancers for Angelica, then whipped her gaze back to Luc. She'd rather not see the look on the woman's face at this moment. Luc twirled and spun her on the floor.

One spin was so quick, Lydia snagged her toe and lost her footing. Luc caught her and whispered in her ear. "You did not think I would allow you to fall?" Before she could reply, he spun her away and they continued the dance.

When it ended, she was breathless. He escorted her to the side where Mr. Wilkinson waited. Lydia kept her eyes down, unwilling to face having denied him his dance.

"Charles, good man. I apologize. I refused to allow her your dance." Luc reached in his pocket and passed Lydia her dance card. "She has slot eight open." Luc patted Wilkinson on the shoulder before walking away and leaving Lydia to her fate.

Lydia tried not to blush as she met Mr. Wilkinson's baffled gaze. "I'm sorry. He claimed as Ivete's brother...." She couldn't bring herself to finish the sentence about having the first claim. The words were too humiliating, as though she were Luc's family property. She passed him her card. Wilkinson took her dance card and set pen to paper. It took the man no less than five seconds to slope the first letter of his name onto the page.

Her feet tapped with impatience.

"Excuse me, Mrs. Skinner?"

Lydia looked over her shoulder. "Oh! Mr. Bennon!" She looked back at Wilkinson. He was only halfway through his name now and she wondered if this was a sort of punishment.

"Are you ready for our dance?" Mr. Bennon inquired.

She cast a glance at him over her shoulder. "Just a moment." She turned back to Wilkinson, feeling very much like a ball bouncing back and forth. She ground her teeth. Why could these people not just treat this as a barn dance and allow their guests to approach one another and ask for a dance as the fancy took?

As the night progressed, Lydia learned how rare it was for a man to be both rich and handsome. No wonder Willem had been dancing the night away with partner after partner. She imagined the whole Graham family had been quite welcome at all events back when they had three available sons of marriageable age.

Maxine sidled up to Lydia. "Have you had a nice evening?"

"This event is unequalled." The number of candles that burned made the house as bright as noon day. The light glittered off the jewelry the guests wore and lit Maxine's green eyes, too.

Maxine laughed softly. "Not in Chicago. It is special because it is my family, but an event of this scale is quite common."

The two women stood shoulder to shoulder watching the swishing skirts.

Maxine lifted a drink from a passing waiter. "You know, you've been quite popular this evening. When you are ready, you might

return to Chicago and allow me to help you find a husband.”

Lydia laughed, “I had meant to ask if I could stay on as part of your staff.” She shook her head. “These people are not for me. Della and Thomas are my kinds of people.”

“And Ivete?” Maxine turned her gaze on Lydia.

Lydia squinted, trying to find the words. “She is, but not when she’s here. This is her world, but so is Aster Ridge.”

Maxine smiled. “Yes, she can be quite the chameleon.”

Lydia gave Maxine a questioning look at the unfamiliar word.

Maxine waved away her confusion. “It is an animal Ivete would not appreciate being compared to.”

Another young gentleman approached Lydia, and with a sorry smile, she left Maxine’s side.

As they danced, Lydia’s mind kept wandering to Maxine’s offer. She couldn’t even remember the name of the man who was holding her.

He caught her gaze. “Are you new to the area?”

She shook her head, taking in his features. They were acceptable, though far from making a girl swoon. Was she ready to be courted again? If Maxine could find her a husband, she would not have to visit Wyoming and separate from her children. She could avoid staying with the Skinners or having to deal with Roberta’s wrath. And yet, hers and Simon’s plans kept coming to her mind. Their dreams of raising their children out of the city. She could not deny him that dream, though his death had crushed all of Lydia’s.

The dancers swirled around her, and despite their finer gowns and sparkling jewels, they conjured the same excitement in her breast as the dances of her youth. Suitors had crowded her, but she’d wanted only Simon. Those lantern lit evenings were so long ago. How could she return to that phase of life, and what was she to do with her children? Would any man want to raise another man’s offspring? Lydia had seen it done but never successfully. The children who weren’t his own were always hustled out the door as soon as they were old enough. A bad situation, but acceptable. Would that be her life now? *Acceptable*. It might not be fair to Milo and Bridget, but it was their life. Lydia would do the best she could for her children and marry someone who was kind above all else. He might decide to push them out the door when they were old enough, but she could hope he would be good to them while they lived within his walls.

When the song ended, her partner bowed. She’d said not a word to the man the entire dance. She winced. “Thank you.” She’d have to do better than that if she wanted to find a good man to take on herself and her children.

As she moved from him, her gaze caught on a flash of yellow

rushing from the banquet hall. She hurried to follow Della, concern wrapping its coils around her. When she got around the wall, she saw Bastien holding a letter and speaking to Della who collapsed into his arms.

Lydia's feet moved faster as she approached. "What is it?"

Bastien brushed his hand down Della's hair, ruining her carefully made coif. "It's her brother. He's had an accident at the factory, and an infection has set in."

"In Omaha?" Lydia had heard of Della's brother, Garrick. Della had wanted Bastien to bring him out to Montana, but Garrick refused. They'd suspected her father had poisoned Garrick against them.

"C'mon." Bastien gestured with his head to the hallway that led to the kitchen. He found a small alcove with a high table and pressed Lydia and Della inside. "I'm going to send a reply to your aunt. Then I will be back to collect you. We'll leave tonight if you'd like. Or first thing tomorrow morning."

Della nodded and wrapped her arms around Lydia. The two stayed like that for several moments until Della sniffed and pulled away. She wiped the tears from her eyes.

"We should have tried harder. *Made* him come out. I knew he was working in the factories where so many lose their lives."

"You can't blame yourself. He's what, seventeen? You couldn't have made him do anything."

Della's downturned face told her she didn't believe Lydia.

"If anyone is to blame, it is your father. Whatever he said to poison Garrick against you was false. And Bastien has loads of influence here in Chicago. I'm sure he can acquire the best medical care for Garrick."

Though concerned for Della and her brother, Lydia couldn't help but wonder what she would do? Would they take her and her children along to fetch Garrick— three more pieces of luggage to burden them in their grief? Would they leave her family here? Ivete and Thomas would be off on their honeymoon leaving only Angelica for companionship. She shuddered at the thought. Perhaps she could find a coach back to Aster Ridge.



WHEN THE MUSIC ENDED, Willem's stomach growled, ordering him to bolt for the kitchens. He gladly obeyed. Food was just what he needed after working his way through the steady stream of girls Angelica pressed into his arms.

Lydia too had a continuous flow of men approaching her. He doubted she had a single empty slot. Even Luc had claimed her for a dance and though he'd gambled and pressed Willem to make an advance, Willem thought he sensed an affection in the married man

that wasn't at all appropriate.

Willem made his way out of the banquet hall and down the stairs to the prep area. The servants were abuzz, and he regretted disturbing them. The throng became thicker as he neared the kitchen. Eventually, he stopped with servants moving past him like a river around a rock. His best bet was to take food from the trays before they got to the party. He turned and searched for a quiet nook in which he could see but not be seen. He knew just the place. His feet were already taking him there when he stopped. It was already occupied. "Ladies, why are you not at the party?"

Lydia faced him, her eyes filled with fear. He bridged the gap between them and gripped her arms as he searched her face.

Lydia met his worried gaze. "Della has had a bit of bad news."

He turned to Della but kept hold of Lydia.

Della dabbed at her face with a handkerchief. "It's Garrick. He's had an accident at the factory. My aunt says he's sick with fever from the amputation."

Willem met Lydia's eyes. "Garrick?" He'd not heard the name before and the explanation did nothing to help Willem understand Della's distress.

"Her brother."

Willem released Lydia. "I'll go find Bastien."

"He knows. He's just gone up to send a reply."

Willem nodded. His hands fidgeted. He needed to help. No, he needed to hold Lydia once more, to banish the fear he'd seen in her eyes. Bastien appeared and slid an arm around Della's waist. "We're going to retire for the night so we can get an early start in the morning. If Ivete misses us, please give her our apologies."

Willem had questions, but he gave his brother a nod. He and Lydia were left in the nook. A server stopped by and offered a tray of food. Willem waved them away. "Do they think he will die?"

"We know very little. It was good Della's aunt knew to write to her here. The letter would have taken longer going through Aster Ridge."

"Good. That's good." Willem stared at a spot on the floor and chewed on his lip. He met Lydia's eyes. "Do you know him?"

Lydia shook her head. "He lives with Della's father."

The familiar pink of Angelica's skirts rounded the corner. "What are you two sequestered in here for? There are guests to entertain."

Willem kept his eyes from rolling toward the ceiling. "I've entertained enough for the night."

"Lydia? You may not be family, but you are an honored member of the bridal party. Our guests are very interested in meeting you." Angelica motioned with her hand for Lydia to come along.

Lydia's eyes glazed over, their usual fire snuffing out. No doubt she

still processed Della's absence and what her friend could be facing when she arrived in Omaha. She leaned forward as though to follow Angelica, but Willem put a hand in front of her. "Lydia has had a bit of a shock, and she'll return to the party when she's recovered."

Angelica narrowed her eyes, likely suspecting that he and Lydia were in this alcove for an entirely different reason. *Good. Let Luc think he's losing our bet.* The moment he had the thought, he regretted it. Regretted making the bet at the first. Lydia had no inclination to kiss him, and if the heavens opened, and she decided he was a man she'd like to kiss, he'd not be able to for fear of fulfilling his side of the bet.

Angelica turned, a flurry of skirts, and bustled away.

Lydia turned to him. "Thank you."

Willem waved to a server who brought a tray. "Leave it, please." Willem lifted it from the servant's white gloved hands, and Lydia chuckled when he set it on the small table. The tray more than covered the tabletop. They ate until it was empty.

Willem brushed crumbs from his hands. "Have you enjoyed the party? Were your country dances like this?"

Lydia laughed. "Not at all. But the dancing was much the same, only with a few less instruments. We usually had a pair of fiddles and a flute if old Ms. Mortensen decided to grace us."

"You know, that's a great addition to the Gentleman's ranch. What if we held a dance every week?"

Lydia grinned, licking a bit of honey off her fingertip. "Your ranch is all men. You think Della and I can entertain all your guests?"

"Oh, no. I mean for everyone. Get the town girls to come."

"They won't come without *their* men."

Willem scowled at the curtain. Now that he'd thought of it, he wanted very badly for it to happen. The men who would be coming to the ranch were used to female company, even if it meant paying. Della and Bastien wouldn't allow their ranch to become a brothel, and Willem wouldn't want it to. Only, he would get far more men to visit if they thought there was a chance to court and flirt with a girl.

"Well, then we'll let anyone come. If my gentlemen are well mannered, the women might choose them over their country beaux. We'll provide good enough food that the whole county will know our ranch is the place to be on the month's end."

"If it's once a month, you'll get a larger group. I think you are right that the town will want to come. An event put on by a family like the Graham's is bound to draw a crowd."

"Even in Aster Ridge?" Willem thought of the families out in Montana. People like the Morris's who were hardly scraping by on their ranch, who had to send their children to work so they might make their mortgage. The many guests in the banquet hall were all

there because they had nothing better to do. The two locations couldn't be more different, and yet part of Willem knew the men of Chicago would love it out there.

Lydia's voice cut into his thoughts. "The folks in Montana like a party as well as your fancy Chicago people."

He met her gaze, wondering whether he could turn his ranch profitable and be an acceptable match for Lydia before she left Aster Ridge for good. For the first time in his life he had work he wanted to do, and someone to do it for.

"You are a dear." Willem took her hand and placed a kiss on her knuckles. "Do you have the energy for one more dance?"



Chapter 8



Lydia awoke to a far-off piercing scream followed by a nearby whisper. “Mrs. Skinner. Milo needs you.”

Lydia flung back the covers and fumbled with her nightdress, leaving it to flap open as she and Mary ran to the nursery. Milo screamed. When she reached him, his eyes were still closed.

Mary was at her elbow. “I didn’t dare wake him. They say if you wake a child during a nightmare, he will live that nightmare forever.”

Lydia fell to her knees on the side of the bed and gripped her son’s shoulders. “Milo. Stop this. Milo!” She shook him, trying to wake him. He screamed again, and her heart constricted in her chest as though it would never beat again. Both Violet and Bridget were also awake and crying. Mary held Violet in her arms and sat on Bridget’s bed, trying to soothe both children.

Della entered the nursery and took Violet from Mary’s arms. “What is the matter?”

“Mr. Milo is having a nightmare.”

Milo screamed again. Lydia turned, the image of her friend blurred by her tears. “See if Willem will come.”

Milo slept on, thrashing in his sheets. Lydia didn’t know whether to remove the tangled fabric or to use it to pin him down. She tried to speak softly to him. “Milo. Mama is here. You are safe. Milo, it’s me.”

Another scream filled the room, making Lydia’s chest feel as though it were being crushed by a rock.

“Lydia?” Willem’s concerned voice sounded from the doorway.

“Willem.” Lydia ran to him, stopping before she flung herself into his arms. She took his hand and tugged him to the bed. “It’s Milo. He won’t wake from his nightmare.”

Willem stepped around Lydia and went to Milo’s bed. He gripped the boy’s shoulders, and Milo looked small in his large hands. “Milo, wake up.” Milo stilled from his thrashing, but his eyes remained closed. “Milo, it is only a dream. You are safe in bed. Your mother is right here.”

“Papa,” Milo whimpered into his pillow. The word cut Lydia like a saber. A choked sob tore from her chest, and she crumpled to the floor, her face in her hands. Wave after wave rolled through her as she poured out her grief. She might find herself a husband, but he would never replace Simon. Milo would always remember and miss his

father.

Soft hands lifted her from the ground. The scent of clean linens and a hint of cigar smoke reached her nose as Willem hefted her into his arms. He breathed a soft “shhh,” into her hair as he carried her from the nursery.

“I can’t. Milo,” she protested, reaching back for her child.

“He’s asleep.”

“Yes, but—” She tried to look over Willem’s shoulder, but the realization came, cutting off her words. As she had cried, consumed in her own grief, Milo’s sobs had ceased. Milo hadn’t screamed once since Willem had arrived and spoken to him.

Willem used his chin to press her head into his shoulder. When they reached her room, he placed her on her bed. He knelt on the floor, his elbows on the mattress as though he were about to say nightly prayers.

Tightness besieged her puffy eyes and her chest ached from holding back her sobs. “He misses his father.”

“You all do.”

Lydia shook her head. “I’m afraid”—she swallowed, never having voiced this fear even to herself—“he feels his father is slipping away. Bridget doesn’t remember him. Even I am recovering. I shouldn’t. If I don’t cling to Simon’s memory, who will? It’s as though the more I heal, the worse Milo gets. He doesn’t want me to forget his papa.”

“You aren’t forgetting him.”

“But I don’t miss him like I used to. It’s not even been a year, and ...” Lydia didn’t say any more. She’d already said too much. Willem probably thought her a callous woman.

“You’re meant to heal. Simon would have wanted it.”

As a sob rolled from her chest, she buried her face into her pillow. There was once a time when hearing Simon’s name from someone who never knew him, would never know him, would have broken her. Now, Willem’s permission for her to heal brought tears of another kind.

Lydia turned her head just enough to see Willem’s hands on her mattress, his serious, handsome face twisted with concern. “Simon would, but what about my children? Milo may never want it.” A child wouldn’t understand the need a woman with two small children had for a husband. Would her son hate her when she moved on?

Willem pressed the hair away from her face. It stuck to the tears on her cheeks which he wiped away with his thumb. His fingers slid under her hair and pressed against her head and neck. His forehead met hers and he exhaled. Lydia closed her eyes, soothed by his attention in the same way Milo must have been.

Willem’s voice was a deep rumble. “Milo is a child. He is strong

and resilient. You are his mother, and he loves you dearly. He will accept whatever choice you make.”

She stared into Willem’s eyes, black without a lantern in the room. If only she could claim him as her own. Milo would not mind having Willem for a father. She bit back a scoff. And what? Expect him to marry a widow, when he has so many options for young beautiful women before him? Or ask him to stay in Aster Ridge instead of living the plush life he has planned? If he asked, she would go against Simon’s wishes for his children to live in the country. She wouldn’t mind so much if it meant a life with Willem.

He stood, pressing a kiss to her forehead before moving away. He took his warmth with him, leaving her forehead cold where his lips had touched.



WILLEM’S MOUTH TINGLED with the warmth of Lydia’s skin. His ears buzzed with the painful cry of her sobs. How he’d wanted to do more than kiss her forehead, as if she were a child like Milo. He’d rather have climbed into the bed beside her and gathered her into his arms. What then? Tell her he’d missed her? Tell her he wanted her for himself? As his family so often told him, he wasn’t ready for a wife, nor children. He’d yet to find financial success and he cursed himself for waiting so long to find a path to independence. The ranch had yet to begin and with his inheritance in the balance, now was not the time for professions of love.

Willem returned to the nursery and spoke to Mary. “Does this happen often?”

The maid nodded.

“Get me the next time. You can get Lydia first, then you come to me. Understood?”

She nodded again. Della rocked Violet in a chair near the window. Willem approached her and took the rocking chair to her left.

He didn’t have any words. His heart still raced, and he knew he wouldn’t be able to sleep again for a long while. He stared into the dark room at markings on the walls where the moon shone through the windows. Lydia was burdened with such a weight. How was a woman to bear the loss of her husband and still be expected to care for young children? How blessed she was to have friends such as Della and Bastien. He shuddered to think where she would be without their charity.

He recalled the letter she’d sent to her mother-in-law. Even now would Lydia reject their hospitality and go to Simon’s family? And why? So she could be the burden of another family? Willem knew Lydia well enough to know she would not stay on the Skinner’s

charity for long. Her pride would push her to move on. And where would she go next? She'd mentioned her mother's home wasn't an option. By that time would she be ready for marriage and move into the home of a new husband?

His hands gripped the arms of the rocking chair. He hated to think of her marrying some man for any reason except love. She was vibrant, smart, hardworking, and a gentle mother. Any man would be glad to have her in his home, in his arms. He itched to get back to Aster Ridge, to double down his efforts to finish the bunkhouse and get going on the making money aspect of his gentleman's ranch.

Could Lydia wait that long? If only Milo were older. Willem thought of the Morris's who lived near Bastien's home. They managed to eke out a living without their father, but their children were older and three were boys who could help run their farm. Not only are Lydia's children young, but she doesn't own a profitable farm to run. Not even Willem's ranch was profitable. But he could bring her on, hire her to help him when he had guests. Della mentioned the things he would need to buy, sheets and such. He would need someone to wash those sheets and to make meals. If he hired her, would that buy her enough time to make a thoughtful choice for her family rather than one made in desperation? Willem tilted his head back against the chair and let out a long breath.

Della stood and placed Violet in her bed. The child remained asleep, and Della returned to her chair at Willem's side.

Della whispered, "She knew you could help."

Willem kept his eyes on his niece, her face showing nothing of the tears from before.

Della used her toes to rock. "Lydia asked for you the moment I entered the room."

"I wish I could do more. Stopping his screams is far from solving the problem."

"You cannot solve everything, but you can lighten the load. They are grieving the loss of a good man."

Was Lydia still grieving? She'd said she felt recovered, or close to. And she felt guilty because of it. "Do you and Bastien expect her to grieve indefinitely?"

"Of course not." Della's voice sounded pained.

"I'm sorry." He scrubbed his stubble. "Will Bastien leave to fetch your brother in the morning?"

"We both will. Garrick wouldn't go with Bastien. He may not even go with me. But if his life is at risk, I think we can convince him."

"Lydia said your father has done some damage between you two." Della nodded.

"If you can save his life, this may be a blessing in disguise."

Della patted his arm. "Underneath all that bravado, you *are* insightful." She stood and left.

Willem stood, too, his body heavy. "Mary, if he starts up again, get me first. Just this night." He couldn't take on Lydia's trials, but he could give her a bit more rest with which to deal with them. He could also give her a bit of money and work so she might not feel like such a burden to Della and Bastien. He may not have a successful business that allowed him to care for a widow and her children, but if she accepted, he would pay her to work his ranch even if it meant bankruptcy.



THE NEXT DAY THE SUN shone brilliant. Lydia and Mary were out in the yard with the children. Milo and Bridget played as though last night had never happened. Lydia sat on a blanket, letting the sun dissolve her midnight sorrows. Perhaps Willem was right. Children were resilient. His touch last night had been almost as warm as the sun against her skin now. Warmer in that cold moment as he'd put her to bed. She drew a deep breath and opened her eyes to see that very man striding on long legs towards them across the lawn. He approached and joined her on the blanket.

Though he had no way of knowing he'd just been the object of her thoughts, her cheeks burned anyway. "I must apologize. I should not have sent for you last night. I'm so embarrassed."

Willem caught her hand from her lap and held it in both of his. "Please don't be embarrassed. I was glad to help. Please, call for me right away in the future."

That was what she wished she could do, pass the burden along to someone who was stronger and better equipped for the task. "No. I can handle it. Usually. I was afraid he would wake the household if I didn't think of something quick. Della had already come and ... I panicked."

Willem dipped his head and caught Lydia's downcast gaze. "I'm honored that you would send for me." Bridget gave a shriek of delight as she ran from Milo. Willem turned his attention to the siblings' play, and Lydia was free to watch him as he spoke. "It is not easy being home. Here, I can never escape who I was. They all think me still the screaming child, or the irresponsible youth. I'm a liability, not a valuable addition. It is nice to be needed, though I wish it wasn't in a way that caused you distress."

His gaze moved from her children back to her, raking her face as though searching for something. For a moment, he seemed to fixate on her mouth. She stilled, willing herself not to blush at his attention. He cleared his throat and turned again to watch the children. He was as

large as any of his brothers and every bit a man. There was no sign of the youthful boy he spoke of.

Lydia wanted to reach out to him. To touch his arm in a show of solidarity. She kept her hands firmly in her lap. "I'll be needing you until Bastien and Della return."

He gave her one of his smiles where his teeth showed on only half his mouth. It was no wonder Angelica was keen to set him up. The way the girls fawned over him last night ... financially independent or not, he'd be married in no time.

"Now you're just trying to make me feel better. I saw you last night. You melded into Chicago society as though born to it. I wouldn't be at all surprised if several gentlemen call for you before our time here is up."

Lydia sniffed. She could hardly remember any of the men she'd danced with. Her mind had first been on her children and what type of father she would be able to find for them. Next, she'd been concerned for Della and Bastien. Willem was kind to suggest she'd been the belle of the evening, but last night she'd been entirely forgettable.

She only wished she could forget her glimpses of Willem holding so many other girls in his arms. The way he'd coaxed laughter from them. She'd been a fool to think the way he made her smile was unique. Willem was the type who could make anyone laugh, even a grieving widow. None of the men would come calling. None of them were willing to put forth the effort that Willem did. But why? When he had every girl in Chicago swooning over him, why pay attention to a widow with two children and no prospects?

She shook off the emotion she refused to identify. "And you. Were those girls or women who kept you dancing the entirety of the evening?"

Willem barked a laugh. "Girls who wish to be women, I think."

Milo and Bridget bolted over, and Willem grabbed them around their waists, falling onto his back and allowing himself to be knocked over.

Eventually the children decided they didn't wish to be tickled and ran out of his reach. Willem kept his eyes on the kids and shot a hand at them if they came close enough. Every time he reached out they shrieked with delight and ran in the other direction. Finally the children had enough and moved off to inspect something in the grass. Willem turned to her. "Have you had lunch yet?"

"No. Is it already that time? We should head in." Lydia pressed herself onto her knees.

"We can order a picnic out here." He hitched his voice to call to Mary who stood afar. "Mary, will you let Chef know we'd like a

picnic?"

Lydia sank back on her heels. "We can't now. Chef will have already prepared something to be eaten at the table." Lydia wondered if she'd ever get used to food appearing without effort. If she did, she'd be ruined when they returned to Aster Ridge.

Mary faltered, waiting for Lydia and Willem to come to a decision.

"You are right, as usual." He called over his shoulder to Mary. "Nevermind."

Lydia couldn't help but chuckle. "What about a *planned* picnic tomorrow?"

Willem gave a sorry shake of his head. "Can't. Father is introducing me to some of his business associates. He thinks the older crowd might also enjoy my ranch."

"Will any of them join in your trial visit?"

"No. Just last night I filled my final spot. Probably better to have young ones coming out first. Who knows if the bunkhouse will be finished, especially with the delay of Bastien and Della." He shifted his legs so he faced Lydia. "Would you want to head back sooner? To Aster Ridge? We don't have to wait for Bastien."

Lydia gave a polite laugh. "Willem, you and I cannot return together. It would be inappropriate." With Thomas and Ivete on their honeymoon, they would be alone at the ranch.

"Not just you and I. Luc has decided to come along. I know we aren't the cowboys Thomas and Bastien are, but we can both handle a gun if any trouble comes our way."

"It is as though you don't wish for trouble." She pinched his knee and looked at him with a wary eye. "Are you the real Willem or some apparition?"

He gave a reluctant chuckle. "I admit, with money at stake I do not wish for the adventure I once did. The last thing I need is to get robbed, or for any of my guests to be robbed on their way to or from the ranch. Luc is right. We will need a sort of coach of our own. One that boasts a burly guard who shoots on sight."

Lydia shivered. "I suppose with Luc as our chaperone, we could return whenever your business here is complete."

Willem nodded. "Being responsible is all very drab." He heaved a sigh as though wishing for the days when he could enjoy the prospect of being robbed. Ivete was right. Willem would not enjoy settling down just yet. His ranch already pinned him down more than he wished. Lydia wanted to laugh at how shocked he would be at the responsibility of having a wife and children when they came along. As soon as the thought came, she chased it away. She got the same feeling in her belly as she had watching him at the banquet last night. The feeling unsettled her, and that was the last thing she wanted right

before lunch.



Chapter 9



Willem made his way down to breakfast, his mind filled with thoughts of his ranch. He wished to return to Aster Ridge right away. There was much to do before his guests arrived. He couldn't very well expect them to sleep beneath the sky. A footman opened the door on silent hinges and he was greeted by Luc and Angelica sitting at the breakfast table.

Willem stepped up to the buffet table and used the spoon to dish himself a hearty portion of eggs and potatoes from the breakfast spread. "What brings you two here so early?" He itched to take his meal to his bed and away from Angelica's scheming. No doubt she would ask him about one of the girls from the wedding.

Luc leaned back in his chair, rocking it onto the back two legs. Their mother detested the habit, but never chided Luc as she did Willem and Bastien. "I'm joining you and father today, and Angelica thought to spend the day with the ladies."

Willem's shoulders drooped. He could imagine telling his father's friends about some aspect of the ranch, only to have Luc chuckle about how it could go wrong. Those men would surely love to join the endeavor if Luc were the one with the business. Luc would always be a surer bet.

Willem glared at his food. Eating always lifted his spirits. Not today. He'd rather skip the meeting where he would be made a fool and spend his time doing anything else. That picnic with Lydia called to him. But no. He straightened his shoulders. He had few chances to network in Chicago. If he wanted the ranch to succeed, he'd have to get used to these men and ignore Luc's jabs.

"I'm glad," Willem lied. "I wished to speak with you. What do you say about leaving for Aster Ridge on Wednesday?"

Luc leaned back in his chair. "In two days? What of Bastien?"

"I don't see why he should spend the time coming back here, only to hop back on a train for Montana. He will think it a blessing if we take ourselves, and their things, back to Aster Ridge."

"Lydia and her children will accompany us?"

"Of course."

Luc lowered his voice. "I would have thought you might want as much extra time as you could gather." He sat back in his seat. "Unless you've already won the bet?"

Willem shook his head and leaned closer. "I told you I wasn't acting on that bet. I'm more concerned about getting the bunkhouse built. Your friend Wilkinson has connections with the industry men in this city. If I can impress him, he can bring me a new network of potential business."

Luc turned to Angelica. "Darling, what do you say? Can I be ready by Wednesday?"

Angelica nodded and Luc faced Willem. "There you have it." He clapped his hands and rubbed them together.



LYDIA SAT IN THE DRAWING room wishing she could join Willem on his business meeting. Anything would be better than listening to Angelica tell Maxine of all the ladies who could be a match for Willem.

Maxine's eyes sparkled at Angelica. "This is delightful. You know, we never had the chance to encourage anyone for Bastien, and there was a time I didn't think Luc would ever marry."

Angelica scoffed. "Bastien would have had options galore if he'd come back here unmarried." She sighed, as though wishing Della never existed.

Maxine cocked her head at both women. "Few, if any, would have been happy living Bastien's rugged life. When we arrived in Aster Ridge, Della was working as hard as any servant." She tapped her fingers on the table. "It was maddening. Now she's got the babe, so Bastien keeps hired help around. And, of course, Lydia is there to help now, too."

Lydia's tongue turned bitter. Maxine's words put her in the same position as Della's maid, Eloise. The comment shouldn't have bothered her. Lydia *should* be working to earn her keep, except some part of her wished they would add her name into their mix of women for Willem. She pushed the ridiculous thought away. A wealthy wife could help Willem on his way to independence. She could bring him money and connections. Lydia had nothing to offer. A widow with her own set of issues didn't exactly draw a crowd, nor did it draw in the suitors. Yet, children didn't have to mean permanent widowhood. A woman from Lydia's childhood had twelve of them, and she'd found herself a husband when her first had passed. It could be done. Surely Lydia, with only two children, could do it too.

When she returned to Aster Ridge, she would attend the barn dances with Eloise and go into town at every opportunity. Maybe, before her visit to Roberta's she could find herself a man. If nothing else, she'd like to be less desperate when she visited her in-laws.

Angelica set her teacup down with a soft click. "I'm sure Della

didn't mind the work. The lower class are better able to work. They're bred so."

Lydia stood, blood pounding in her ears. "I think I'll check on the children."

Maxine and Angelica smiled, apparently unaware of the offense they spewed.

Lydia climbed up the stairs and strode along the corridor, happy to put distance between herself and the other women. Lydia would be relieved to be back on the ranch and doing the labor that was expected of her *class*.



THE DAYS FLEW BY AND before she knew it, Lydia sat next to Willem on a fast moving train. She felt as if her heart reached across the distance, willing them to Aster Ridge sooner. Travel from Chicago would take two days. A long train ride followed by a night in a hotel and a full day's ride from Billings to the Graham's valley.

Bridget slept on Willem's lap and Milo read a children's book, a gift from Maxine before they departed.

Lydia looked up at Willem. "Did you send word to Eloise that we will be arriving tomorrow?"

"No. Shall we send her a message when we arrive in Billings?"

Lydia thought of what would need to be done. Really, the only thing they would miss would be a hot meal after the long ride. Lydia would be able to fix something up so long as the children weren't too cranky.

"I think it will be too late, unless you send a wire. I can take care of whatever we need, and Otto will be there to let her know of our return."

Luc's slow drawl came from the seat across from Lydia and Willem. "Who is Eloise?"

Willem's brow lowered. "She's Bastien's house maid, and you'll be on your best behavior."

Luc raised his hands in surrender. "Best behavior. Some maid from the country shouldn't be hard to resist." Luc's shining eyes fell on Lydia as though expecting her to laugh at his crass words. Luc had a beautiful wife and yet he seemed to be interested in every woman who entered his sphere. Della had told Lydia of the Grahams' habit of attending clubs that offered women as a service. At first, she couldn't imagine any of the family members attending such an institution, but Luc's attitude gave her the impression he might be the type.

She lifted her gaze to Willem and hoped he had never sunk so low. The idea of him with a painted woman twisted her stomach.

"Mama."

Lydia jolted from imaginings. "Yes, Milo?"

He pointed to the book. "What's this word?"

She leaned over, grateful for the distraction from her red thoughts.

The next day in the wagon was as bad as it could be. Bridget was ornery all the day and wanted out of the wagon. She tugged at her ears, and Lydia feared an infection. Luc rode Willem's new mount and stayed far ahead and away from Bridget's racket while Willem drove the wagon. Milo sat up top with his idol, and Willem allowed him to lead the wagon for a portion of the day.

By the time they passed through the town of Dragonfly Creek and continued onto the Graham's home, Bridget lay face down on the floor of the wagon, kicking. Again. Lydia would trade places with Willem in a heartbeat if he let her. She could lead horses. She'd never done it before, but she'd do practically anything to get away from her child just now.

Lydia glanced at Willem, hoping he would hear the struggle and offer help. He had a knack with children, at least with *her* children. Her muscles tensed, ready to call for him. No. First, Milo's nightmare and now Bridget. She couldn't call on him at every crisis. Frustration coursed through her, tightening her chest and clenching her jaw. It was as though in times of crisis when she was out of ideas, her only idea was Willem. Yet, he did not seek responsibility, nor should she expect him to help.

She turned to the right, pinching the bridge of her nose.

The ranch house appeared as they crested the hill.

Lydia whimpered with joy. "The light is on. Who could be inside?"

"Eloise, I imagine. I sent her a wire when we reached Billings."

Lydia wanted to throw her arms around Willem. And she might have, if he weren't up on the buckboard. "I thought ..."

Willem glanced over his shoulder, showing a flash of his half-smile. "You know me. I couldn't imagine driving all day only to arrive at a place without food waiting."

Lydia wanted to beam at him, but Bridget jumped toward the wagon's edge.

Lydia lunged, cinched her arms around her daughter's waist, and wrestled her back inside. "Fifth time today," she panted.

Willem laughed. "Almost home! Don't get out until we stop moving, Bridget, girl."

When the wheels came to a stop, Lydia gathered her small satchel and tossed it over the side. Willem took Bridget, then lent a hand as Lydia climbed down. Bridget let out a wail of injustice, apparently now fond of the confines of the wagon. Willem and Lydia met eyes.

His were light and laughing as ever, as though he hadn't suffered through hours of the child's crying. "Take her inside, get her some

food. I too get cranky when I'm hungry."

Every muscle in Lydia's body was tense, but Willem's words made her laugh. The smile that spread across her face melted away some of the stress of the day. She and Bridget made their way to the big house, its whitewashed exterior like some beam from heaven promising her sanctuary.

When they entered, Eloise rushed over and tried to take Bridget, but the child cried out and clung to Lydia's neck. Finally Lydia shook her head and told Eloise she would go put Bridget to bed. The men unloaded the wagon with Milo's help. Lydia felt a surge of pride for her son and gratitude to the men who assisted and encouraged Milo in his want to serve.

Lydia lay down with Bridget, stroking the child's face until her blue eyes drooped closed. Lydia's body felt heavy on the mattress, and she had to drag herself from the bed and into the main house.

Eloise led Lydia to the table and pressed her into the seat. "I'm sorry, I should have just made this in the guest house. Is Bridget asleep?"

Lydia nodded, a gaping yawn overtaking her.

"Eat," Eloise demanded. Before she was more than a few bites in, the men and Milo entered.

"Smells divine, Eloise." Willem's loud voice broke the stillness of Lydia's fatigue. "Otto says he's ready to go whenever you are."

Eloise nodded. "He can wait. I'm not leaving the dishes for Lydia. Did you come all the way from Chicago? She looks dead on her feet."

"Thanks." Lydia chortled, feeling exactly as Eloise described.

When they finished the meal, Lydia walked Eloise out to Otto. Milo came too, telling Lydia what he'd recently learned. "Willem says a man takes care of all the women around him, but especially his mother."

Lydia smiled at her son, so eager to do his hero's bidding. "Being a man is quite the responsibility. You'll be one before you know it. For now, I want you to read me a bedtime story and let me fall asleep."

Willem was a positive influence for Milo. And yet, some part of her raged against his teaching things to Milo. Too soon, Willem's ranch would be complete and, apparently, he would return to Chicago. Milo should not be so attached to the man. And yet Milo's attachment to Willem proved one thing—he needed a father figure. And since Willem wouldn't be around to do it, Lydia would have to find him one.



WHEN LYDIA WOKE, THE sun was already in the sky. The children had slept late, also tucked from their travels. After changing

Bridget's nappy, Lydia had climbed back into bed and lay there half-asleep while listening to Bridget play with her blocks. It was good to be home, and yet, this wasn't her home. She was comfortable here, sure, but when would she find a place that was truly home? A place where her children could make forever friends, a place where she might go to the general store and be invested in the gossip shared.

Milo bounded over, already dressed for the day. "I'm going to go help Willem. He's finishing the bunkhouse today."

Lydia laughed. Finishing that bunkhouse would take a sight longer than a day. "First breakfast, then you may help him."

Once they were all dressed, they made for the big house. The heavenly smells of breakfast wrapped around them as soon as she opened the front door. Eloise must already be here. Milo dashed into the kitchen and Lydia walked past the food to put Bridget in her chair.

Luc sat at the table with a nearly empty plate before him. His face lit when he saw Lydia. "Good morning. Eloise here was just telling me her family owns a farm nearby."

Lydia nodded. "You'll find most folk around here are farmers. Has Willem already eaten?"

Eloise's voice came from the kitchen. "Long since. He almost didn't wait. Anxious, he was, to get working."

Luc leaned back in his chair and stretched his arms up to cradle the back of his head. "These brothers of mine have turned into regular laborers. All work and no play."

Lydia waited for him to parrot Angelica's crass comments about those who worked, but they didn't come. Instead, he hitched the corner of his mouth and flattened his palms on the table, "As they say, 'when in Rome'." He pressed himself to standing and walked to Lydia, pulling her hand from where it rested on the table so he might plant a kiss on the back. "But you should know, I'd much rather spend the day in your company than Willem's."

Lydia chuckled as he left the house. When the door clicked closed, she looked at Eloise. "Be careful with that one. He is a flatterer."

Eloise laughed. "I noticed. I'll be glad to have a full house again."

Would Luc behave better around Bastien? He certainly didn't have any qualms showing his true colors to Willem. She supposed that was part of Willem's charm. He could get on with anyone and part of that was his utter lack of judgment. Unlike Angelica. If someone was different from Willem in social standing or morals or appearance, it didn't bother him. He would find the common ground and bathe in it. Was that why he made her feel so warm and comfortable? It couldn't be any other reason, that's just who he was for everyone. Right?



WILLEM GLANCED UP AT Milo's shout as the child jogged toward the bunkhouse site. Luc followed at a languid pace. Willem laughed. His brother would not be much use building the bunkhouse, but if Willem could earn his brother's praise, it would be worth more than an extra set of hands.

Help he would need though. In his wire to inform Eloise of their return, he'd also begged the help of the eldest Morris boys when their chores on their own farm were through.

Luc picked up a shovel and eyed its dirt-stained blade. "The women here are beautiful and innocent. Even your Lydia, who has been married, holds a certain unblemished air."

Willem glared at his brother. "She's not mine, and of course she's unblemished. Here, hold this so I can get a nail to hold it in place."

Luc pressed his weight against the timber while Willem hammered in a nail. "She has two kids, but by George her waist is small. I itch to see if my hands would fit around it."

Willem's scowl darkened. "Bastien will have a fit if you try anything. She is the widow of a dear friend and under his care."

Willem hit the nail with the hammer one last time then slapped a hand against the board, testing its sturdiness. Good. They moved along the wall to repeat their work.

Luc quirked a brow. "Is that why you hesitate? She is so starved of attention a bit of flattery from me would be most welcome so long as Bastien doesn't know." Willem felt his brother's gaze rake his face. "And why didn't you seal the bet? I would have thought you'd adore a carriage of your own. And she is like a small dog, lapping at your feet."

"Stop it," Willem growled. It was one thing for Luc to admire Lydia's beauty, another to compare her to a dog.

Luc chuckled. "I'm beginning to think you *did* try and she denied you. Have you lost your touch?"

"She didn't deny me because I never tried. Anyway, I never had the *touch*." He walked to the pail and pulled out a handful of nails.

"Of course. Bastien was the one the women fell over. Though there is no reason you can't surpass him with only a little effort."

"I have enough activities taking my effort these days. Will you at *least* hold it level?" Willem glared at his brother and adjusted the plank.

Luc gluttoned on women. From his conversation to his deeds, they were a constant buffet he feasted on. The fact that he'd married Angelica, a woman intended to Bastien, was unsurprising to anyone except their mother who was incapable of seeing the fault in her own children. Likely he'd seen the beauty Angelica grew into, and her commitment to Bastien only livened Luc's interest. He was like a

match struck. Without tinder, his attention would flame up and die down again. Willem only hoped Lydia was sensible enough to not get too close. Otherwise she might burn up as quickly as a newspaper in a fire. Maybe Willem should have pursued the bet, if only so Lydia was clear on his intention. Which was what? To ask her to wait for a man whose family didn't believe in him. Who they all thought was going to flame up just as quickly in business, as Luc flamed with women? No. He couldn't ask anything of her until he was certain he had more to offer.



Chapter 10



Lydia lifted a damp shirt from the wash bin and plucked a clothespin from her apron pocket. As her hand raised in front of her face, she saw the tiny cracks in the tender skin on the back of her hands. Wash day was always hard on the hands, but she knew why they looked this bad. She'd been in Chicago less than two weeks, but it was long enough for her to lose all her calluses. She'd grown soft in that world filled with servants and socializing, and now she had to adjust to this harsh reality.

She cringed in discomfort as her hands flexed and stretched with the task. When she finished, she breathed a sigh of relief and lifted the now-empty basket from the bright grass. The sun shone warm, a sure sign summer approached. Lydia had spent her life in Wyoming. She couldn't decide which territory had a rougher winter. Montana boasted more snow, while Wyoming had the wind. A Wyoming wind would slice through any number of layers and leave a body frigid long after they entered a heated house. Lydia wondered if it was the trees in Montana that stopped the wind. So tall and thin they didn't seem the type to buffer something as agile as wind. After all, the wind had to go somewhere. It made sense that it would continue traveling north to Montana.

Lydia knelt under the sink in the kitchen. It had a large pipe that funneled the water from the sink and into the yard, an invention Bastien had installed for his wife upon their arrival in Aster Ridge. Lydia found the hand ointment Della kept and rubbed it on with a sigh. She closed her eyes, savoring the soothing effect as it glossed over her cracked hands.

"Good afternoon."

Lydia's eyes flung open.

Luc leaned against the kitchen wall. Her breath left her lungs in a whoosh. "Hello, Luc. You gave me a fright."

"I wondered if you might accompany me to town. Willem says he or Bastien go every two or three days."

Lydia hoped there might be a message in town confirming Della's return. She wanted that message, but she had too much to do here. "I can't go, but could you check the post office for me?"

"Why can't you go?"

She screwed the lid back on the ointment and placed it under the

sink. "Too many chores."

"That is Eloise's responsibility."

Lydia chuckled. "Eloise is the Grahams' staff. I have none."

Luc's smile fell and something like regret flickered in his eyes. "I'm sorry. I have lost my tact. The wild west has me in its grip already."

Lydia waved away his apology. "Now that I've visited the Graham household, a great many things make more sense to me. One of them being the reliance on servants. Alas, I am my own servant, and I've my children to care for as well."

"I would be happy to bring back anything you need from town while I am out." Luc's tone was light, as though he were trying to make up for his breach in manners.

"Just the mail."

When he turned to go, Eloise entered from the hallway with a raised eyebrow. The front door clicked, signaling his exit from the house and Eloise leaned in. "He fancies you."

"He's married." She didn't harbor any romantic feelings for the man, and she couldn't help his attention.

Eloise smirked. "Maybe he needs to be reminded."

They both laughed and started the dance of making dinner.

Eloise sidled up next to Lydia, gathering the cut vegetables and placing them in a stock pot. "I've heard the town is holding a barn raising on the weekend for the Wilcox family."

Lydia's heart gave a loud thump, and she slowed her vegetable chopping. In Chicago, she'd committed to putting herself out and letting the town know she sought a husband, but Saturday? Tomorrow? She hadn't time to prepare her mind. "Oh? That will be fun."

"I think you should go. There will be many men there who *aren't* already married."

Lydia stopped chopping and turned to her friend. "I'm not sure I'm ready."

Eloise leaned her elbows on the countertop next to Lydia's cutting board. "You don't have to get married tomorrow. You're just going out to have a dandy."

Lydia shook her head. "I can't. Who will watch the children?"

Eloise smirked. "I knew you were ready." She pressed away from the counter and resumed her work, speaking over her shoulder. "They love Willem about as much as they love you. I'm sure there will be no problem if he watches them. Milo will probably sit at his feet until he falls asleep, and Bridget will climb right onto his shoulder when she's tired."

Lydia laughed at the truth of Eloise's comment. Her mood soured quickly, though. Eloise hadn't suggested Willem go with them. When

she'd thought of dancing, she'd thought of him. But, it seemed everyone understood that when Willem married, he would find a younger girl of a different sort. And when Lydia married, it wouldn't be to Willem.

"Aren't I too old to be courting young men at a barn dance?"

Eloise spun from the pot she was stirring. "Oh, pish. You're twenty-three, younger than all the men looking for brides. Both Hugh and Lachlan would be glad to wed you if they'd any money for a wife."

Lydia smiled at Eloise offering her brothers. "The Morris men are all excellent choices." She sighed. "I might return to Wyoming and see what Simon's family can offer. The last thing I want is to marry in desperation. Nor do I wish to overstay my welcome or Della and Bastien's charity."

Eloise didn't argue, a relief after all the Grahams pretending that her living on their charity for the remainder of her days was an acceptable plan. Eloise was like Lydia, raised in a family without much to spare, a family that prided themselves on self-reliance even in the face of hardship. Help was given to anyone who needed it, but indefinite help was reserved for blood. Lydia thought of her own mother, married to someone that wasn't Lydia's blood; of the way he'd dominated the household. She heaved a defeated sigh. This was the reason she could never go to her own home. Would the pressure to wed be greater in Wyoming or here? If the Skinners had offered Lydia a place in their home, there might have been no pressure at all. As it was, there was something about Roberta's way that caused a fear in Lydia. Without a husband or means to provide for her children, they might be better off with the Skinners indefinitely. And yet, Lydia knew that to be the wrong decision. Children should be with their mother. Roberta's offer made it clear she didn't share that sentiment.

Eloise plucked a green bean from the dish in front of Lydia. "So you'll go with me?"

"I'll go, but only because I don't believe you've not a suitor in town. The men must be clamoring for your affection."

Eloise sighed as she poured the water off the potatoes. The glug of the pipe taking the water outside echoed under the sink. "I can't marry. Not until the farm is paid for."

Lydia had never met Mr. Morris. He didn't have use of his legs from a sickness when Eloise was a young girl. His older boys ran the ranch for him, and Eloise and Otto were hired out to help support the family. Lydia heard rumblings through the gossip mill that the farm was eternally mortgaged. Whenever they paid off a large sum, they would mortgage the land and take out more. They weren't a frivolous family and Lydia trusted that the loan kept them fed.

Lydia's chest ached at the imagined weight of responsibility Eloise

must feel. "Even if it means you never marry?"

Eloise pressed her lips. "Such is our lot. I am a Morris, and I'll not marry another just to rid myself of the name and everything that goes with it."

"You are good and faithful. Maybe *you* can go to Chicago and let Maxine find you a rich fellow. He can pay for your family, and in return earn the right to boast of having the prettiest wife."

Eloise laughed. "I'm not fit for rich folk. I'm glad Maxine is gone. That woman makes me quiver, always watching my movements."

Lydia, too, had noticed Maxine's watchful eye on her more than once. Maxine missed nothing and Lydia had never felt she'd lived up to expectation. So it shocked Lydia that Maxine had offered to help Lydia find a husband. Willem's attention in Chicago felt more than duty. It felt like he genuinely enjoyed her company. Maxine would not have assigned him to her if she'd been afraid of a match between them. So either Maxine approved such a match, or she deemed Lydia so small a threat there was nothing to fear.

Milo bounded into the kitchen, sawdust on his hair and shoulders.

Lydia spun him back towards the door. "Did you bathe in wood shavings? Back outside. Dust yourself off before you come into this house."

Willem strode into the kitchen, turning his head and body this way and that. "Do I meet with your approval?"

"Barely." Lydia grinned and stepped closer to pluck a shaving from his shoulder. "Have a seat." Lydia and Eloise brought the dishes over. Once everyone was situated, they bowed their heads for grace. There was a beat of silence before Willem realized Luc was absent and it was left for him to say the prayer.

Milo snickered and Lydia shot him a glare. After Willem finished the prayer, Luc blasted through the front door. Eloise rushed to set another place for him before he sat down.

Luc set his hat on the table and Eloise scooped it up, accepting his coat as well. "That town is as drab as a scullery maid's hair." He took his seat and looked around the table. "Have I missed grace?"

They nodded and he dove into the meal. "A wire from Bastien. They're on their way with her brother. They expect to arrive tomorrow or the next day." He ate as though half-starved. The others followed suit, and when he finished, he pulled a letter from his pocket. "A letter for you, Ms. Lydia."

The folded paper was passed along the table to Lydia. She recognized the handwriting. Roberta. Lydia swallowed the urge to open it immediately.

"Thank you," she said to Luc, pocketing the envelope with shaking hands. She ate as though whatever words were in her apron weren't

going to change her family's future.



Chapter 11



After their meal Lydia rushed to the guest house. She fell into her bed and read the text with a dry mouth.

Lydia,

A visit would be wonderful. We will come collect you and the children when the spring planting is through. We paid a visit to Simon's grave and noticed a large headstone. Surely, such an extravagance should not have been purchased. Carl can take command of whatever funds remain and assist you in managing them properly. I wish you'd come to us sooner.

How are you faring? Mitch O'Connell has asked about you many times. Your name is once again a popular one among the men in this town. No doubt returning will serve you with numerous options for a new husband and father for your children.

Best,

Roberta

Lydia dropped her hands and the letter into her lap. Giving her funds to Carl, considering a future with Mitch O'Connell. It was too much. Her mouth tasted bitter at the thought of returning. No matter if it was her hometown, moving back would be a step in the wrong direction. Grandchildren or not, Roberta was wasting no time moving Lydia on to a new family. But not before they took what little remained of Simon's earnings. Earnings that would already be long gone if not for the charity of Bastien and Della.

The goodbyes of the Morris children echoed outside the walls of her temporary home. With a sigh, she lifted herself from her bed and went to find her children. How was it that two humans could bring so much joy and with them so much distress? Lydia thought of the trial of the Morris family, but they had three strong boys. Milo was far from being old enough to support Lydia, and she wouldn't want that for him anyhow. Maybe she should accept Maxine's offer. A marriage to a rich Chicago man would provide schooling and support for her and her children. Only, she and Simon had dreamed of raising their

children away from the city. Of giving them a childhood filled with freedom and hard work. Those were the things Simon valued, and since he wasn't here, Lydia would honor those wishes if she could.

She sniffed back her tears and smoothed her forehead from any sign of distress. She stepped through the door to her guesthouse.

Willem strode toward the bunkhouse, Milo at his side. She walked faster to reach the main house where Bridget surely was. When she entered she found Bridget sitting between Luc's knees. She smacked one.

Luc reared his head back. "Oooowww," he yelped.

Bridget sagged against his leg, shaking with laughter.

Luc's head swiveled her way. "Ah, your mother has returned," he whispered to Bridget.

Bridget jumped to her feet. "Mama!" She ran for Lydia, arms outstretched.

Milo used to do the exact same thing when Simon would return from work in the evening. A mother is so constant she doesn't earn the same excitement. The love from a child is more of a trickling spring than a gushing waterfall.

Luc stood and watched Lydia. "Your letter. It was bad news?"

Was she so transparent? "No. It was an invitation to my mother-in-law's home in Wyoming."

"If that was a pleasant surprise, then why do you have redness around your eyes?"

Lydia touched her face. "A gentleman would act as though he'd not noticed." She leaned down and pulled Bridget into her arms, using the child's body to shield her face from any additional scrutiny.

Luc laughed. "I'm no gentleman. Tell me your worries."

She glanced out the window as the sun blazed its exit over the horizon. If only Willem were here. If only he were the one to notice her distress.

Her fears tumbled out of her as though she were the child giving way to the need to express her emotions. "I'm afraid she'll take my children from me. I know it's not a thing that happens, but they have money and here I am, poorer than a church mouse and with no income, living off the charity of others. Can they do that? Can they tell the law that my children would be better cared for with them?"

Luc stepped forward. He reached out, but instead of touching Lydia, he ran a hand over Bridget's downy hair. "I wish I'd studied law instead of business. I can't tell you what is and isn't allowed. But we can speak with a lawyer in town. Or better, don't go to Wyoming. If they mean you ill, stay away."

"They don't mean me ill." He made it sound as though they were planning her death. "In fact, they wish for me to marry again."

Luc pressed his lips out in thought. "You're a smart woman. Maybe these fears are unfounded. If you truly wish to go, I don't see the harm. Go for a bit, then come back here where your children are safe and loved."

He looked adoringly at Bridget. The affection in his gaze was surprising. The way he— a married man— flirted with women, suggested he wasn't a family man. Yet just now his eyes told a different story. Might he be a fine father one day when he settled down a bit? Or would he keep up his antics well after Angelica gave him their first child?

She stepped away from him. "I need to get this little one to bed."

As she walked away, she heard him return to his chair. His words had soothed her heart. He hadn't *solved* anything, but there was comfort in telling someone her problems. She'd never have expected Luc, forever teasing or flirting, to provide a listening ear.

Outside, Milo and Willem headed back to the main house. They met her on the lawn and Milo tickled Bridget's toes.

She smiled down at her son. "I'm putting Bridget to sleep. Then five more minutes for you, sir."

Milo bounded off. Likely to make himself scarce. He knew better than most how to avoid bedtime.

Willem tousled Bridget's hair just as Luc had done moments before. "Night, little one." He scrunched his face and smiled at her.

Bridget replied with lisping words, and Lydia walked into the guest house. The house was still and quiet as always. Too quiet. It wasn't a home. More like a hotel. Life happened in the main house. The guest house was just a place to rest their heads. Or read letters that made the skin around her eyes turn red. Willem hadn't noticed, and she hoped that meant the sign of her distress had disappeared.

Or was Willem no longer looking?

Lydia changed Bridget's diaper and clothes for bed, thinking all the while of Chicago. Willem had been her constant companion. She'd enjoyed his company before Chicago, when they were both in Aster Ridge, but there had been something different in how he had treated her in Chicago. He'd shown a sense of pride, of ownership, of his city. The way he'd smoothly spoken about his ranch to anyone who would listen. Or the way he laughed with the servants. Here, he was a laborer like Luc said. Lydia struggled to understand what Willem loved so much about living out west. Everything was harder, colder, dustier.

For the first time, Lydia resented Simon's desire for his children to grow up in the country. He hadn't grown up in the country. He'd lived in a fine house with his well-off family. It was easy for the rich to see the charm in living in the grime. Harder once they experienced it

long-term. Was that what Willem experienced now? Did he wish to return to his life in Chicago with its cobble-stoned streets and fresh-faced young women vying for his affection? No way he would stay here for good. This was a blip in his life. As was his need to entertain her in Chicago. Soon he would go back to where he came from and Lydia should too. Back to Wyoming.



ON SATURDAY THE ELDER Morris brothers joined the fray of bunkhouse building. Bastien and Della had returned the night before with a glaring Garrick in tow. Willem led Bastien to the bunkhouse. He couldn't suppress a note of nervous anxiety at whether his brother would approve.

Bastien crossed his arms. "It's good work. I hope Otto didn't neglect my beasts while he was helping you."

Willem laughed, his nervous energy glad for the reprieve. "Brother! You insinuate that I did not accomplish this task with my own abilities."

"I do. And I hope you are paying those Morris boys handsomely. They've more than enough work on their own farm."

"They're fine workers. I'll pay them whatever they want if they'll come build the next one for me. I've a splinter that refuses to be sucked out." Willem brushed his thumb over the sore spot on his index finger.

"You'll need more than those boys to run this ranch. You'll not be using Della to feed a hoard of men. And Eloise has enough work. The Morris's have another girl. She's young, but no doubt capable of the washing and cleaning."

Willem winced. "I've a concern about bringing over a young girl. We need someone like round Mrs. Archer with a rolling pin in her floured hands. She's a woman who could handle a group of rowdy men."

Bastien nodded. "Too bad you can't poach her from her bakery. You've created too much success for her. Now she'll never leave."

"I've considered whether she could spare Edna. But again, I need someone stronger, who knows what men want and how to refuse it without question."

Lydia strode from the big house, drawing their eyes as she removed the laundry from the line with swift hands. She placed the pins in her apron pocket and hefted the now-full basket onto a hip as she returned. The job had taken less than two minutes.

Willem couldn't keep his eyes from darting to Bastien as he asked, "Might Lydia need some work?"

Bastien slid his gaze to Willem. "She does not need work. We give

her everything she needs and would give her more if she'd accept it."

"You know she's thinking of heading back to Wyoming? She doesn't want to live on your charity." There were other ways to save her from living on their charity. Ways that meant she was his in the sight of God. Willem tried to squelch the thought, but it stuck as well as a goat head thorn in a boot. Why couldn't he marry her? She was fond enough of him, and surely she didn't need so much money to live. Unlike the women in Chicago, Lydia might consider him a man already made.

Bastien bobbed his head to the side. "If she would like the work, that is one thing, but I don't trust you to give it to her in such a way that she would feel able to refuse. You have a way of getting what you want from people."

Willem laughed. "I have no such witchy ways."

They entered the house. The kitchen overflowed with women and children, the noise deafening after the quiet prairie.

Bastien leaned in. "I've a mind to build a playroom off the kitchen so the little ones might be close but not underfoot."

He slid his arm around his wife and kissed the top of her head. "How is Garrick faring?"

Della gave him a look that Willem couldn't decipher.

Bastien obviously understood her wordless reply because he chuckled. "You leave him to us. Nobody can resist Willem's charms." Bastien jerked his head, a gesture for Willem to follow as they made their way to Violet's room. The infant had yet to use her own room, so constant was the Grahams' home filled with guests.

"You might want to build on a few more rooms before you build a playroom."

Bastien nodded. "Della said this place was too big. Now we know she and I were both wrong. I had no idea so many of my siblings would take a fancy to Aster Ridge. Please tell me Luc intends to return to Chicago. I fear his presence would steal much of my enjoyment from the place."

"He has been well-behaved. I believe Eloise is yet untouched. Lydia too, though Luc's been sniffing around." Willem's brow lowered at the thought. He'd started to wonder if Lydia enjoyed Luc's attention and watching her smile for him made Willem want to tie his brother on a horse and send him for the hills.

"Surely he is not ..." Bastien stopped, likely realizing that nothing was beneath Luc.

"He flatters Lydia and finds every opportunity to be near her."

Bastien's nostrils flared. He, too, hated the idea of a union. Bastien knocked on the door before pushing it open. Della's brother, Garrick, lifted himself off the pillows at their entrance.

“Good morning,” Bastien said. “I wanted to introduce you to my brother, Willem.” Bastien turned to Willem. “This is Della’s brother, Garrick.”

Each nodded at the other.

“Willem is doing work for a gentleman’s ranch. He will have plenty for you to do when your hand is healed.” He faced Willem again. “He has only just recovered from the fever. The doctor says four more days of rest, then he can begin using his hand.” Bastien clapped Willem on the shoulder. “Why don’t you two get acquainted?” And he left the room.

Willem blinked at the young boy. Rarely was he shocked speechless, but the bandage on Garrick’s hand spoke of an amputation and Willem felt genuine pity for the young man.

“Does it hurt?” Willem asked, taking a seat in the rocking chair meant to soothe a baby to sleep.

Garrick waved the bandaged limb in the air. “Not so much anymore. Sometimes they hurt, the ones that are gone. It’s the strangest thing.”

Willem’s breath left him. Strange indeed. “Lydia mentioned you might not be thrilled to join the Grahams in their valley.

Garrick rolled his eyes towards the ceiling. “That man took my sister from us.”

“Well.” Willem didn’t want the lie to circulate, but he also didn’t know how open Garrick was to hearing the truth. “She’s a might happy. Have you seen the two of them together? Like lovebirds. It’s almost too hard to watch.”

Garrick pressed his lips as though hiding a smile.

“When you get sick of watching them gaze into each other’s eyes, come out to the bunkhouse. There’s plenty of work that can be done with one hand.”

Garrick nodded, but Willem could tell the boy had softened. Willem slapped his hands on his knees and pressed himself to standing. “Well, it was great to meet you, Garrick. I’ll see you for dinner, then.”

Willem made his way back to the kitchen to find Luc and Lydia in the kitchen, alone. He was leaning on the counter, a smiling Lydia pressed into a corner. Luc straightened when he saw Willem and Lydia moved back to her task of mixing something in a bowl. Both looking like guilty children.

Luc stuffed his hands in his pockets. “Lydia here says she’ll join me on a trip to town for those supplies. A woman’s touch will be needed to select everything for the bunkhouse.”

Willem glared at Luc. “I’ll go. You can stay back and oversee the work.”

Luc narrowed his eyes at Willem, no doubt irritated at the change of plans. His disappointment lifted Willem's spirits. If only Lydia's back wasn't to him so he could see which brother's attitude Lydia mirrored.

Luc heaved a sigh and pulled the letters from his pocket. He slapped a stack of envelopes onto the counter. Willem had prepared the invitation for the folks in Chicago and they were to be mailed in town. Luc left the house, slamming the door behind him. Willem drew a deep breath. Guests would be arriving in a week and he wasn't yet ready.

"I've much to purchase and would be greatly in your debt if you would come and assist me. Bastien has made it clear he does not want Della to be burdened by me in any way. Might I burden you?"

Lydia turned to him, her hands on her hips. "You may." She didn't turn away and her gaze took on a curious glint.

Willem found himself frozen by it, unmanned. He shifted his gaze away from her scrutiny.

"You're different here," she said.

He looked at her once more, lowering his brows as he tried to decipher her meaning. "How?"

"More responsible. In Chicago you were lighter somehow."

Willem gave a hard laugh. "I was there for a wedding. Now I'm back, I've no time for picnics and social calls."

"No, you've no time for such things anymore." Lydia tugged the string and slid her apron off, hanging it along the wall. "I'll just need to speak with Della before we head into town."

She left, and his shoulders drooped. Shaking off whatever feeling bit into him, he took a hot roll from the counter and placed the towel back over it to keep the others warm. He bit into it, the fluffy sweetness as good as anything from the Archer's bakery. Hiring Lydia would be a fine business decision. She was a widow and no innocent to be taken by the wiles of rich men. With a nod, he set off to ready the wagon for their departure.

Lydia met him at the wagon, a basket on her arm. "We can eat lunch on the road." She nodded at the goods.

"You're too good to me." Willem smiled, hoping to charm her from whatever disappointment he'd read in her eyes earlier. Did she not like who he was here? Did she like the Willem who wore fancy clothes and took her out every day? He could be that man if she were to join him in Chicago. His mother had mentioned more than once her hopes of matching the widow to someone. Willem bit back a laugh, he doubted she meant Willem. And truly, up until Luc's sobering words about Lydia needing a spouse, he'd thought it would be more than a year before she reached that point. He heaved a sigh. If he were more

courageous, he might ask Lydia everything he wondered. Might ask outright if she was ready for another spouse, if she didn't mind marrying a man who might be moving back into his family home if this ranch failed. But her tears from that night with Milo surfaced in his mind and he dared not risk bringing such pain upon her again. No matter Mother and Luc's thoughts, Lydia was not yet recovered from the loss of her dear husband. She was not looking for a replacement.

He shook the thoughts away. If he wanted to help, he should hire her, not marry her. But as they rode shoulder to shoulder, he couldn't help but wish for her to be by his side in more than just business.

When they reached the store, Lydia referred to the list they'd made on the way into town. Yesterday Willem had jotted a few things down, but as they drove, Lydia asked numerous questions and added several items. Luc had been right. Willem had needed a woman to come along. Neither Willem nor Luc would have considered all the details that went into running a household, which was what his ranch would inevitably be. He'd built a bunkhouse with room for a dining table, but no kitchen. Food would be prepared in Della's kitchen, then brought out to the men.

Lydia ordered the items with confidence and knowledge that spoke to her ability to command men. The more he watched her, the more he wanted her for his ranch— a perfectly reasonable and safe way to help her. He shook his head. Luc often spoke of the stress of providing for a family, and Luc's family contained just one woman. Willem was far from ready to take on a woman with two children, even one so lovely and competent as Lydia. He desired to better her situation, but a man more responsible than he would have that duty. At Ivete's wedding banquet, the men had flocked to Lydia in her dress the color of a hothouse poppy, her dark hair pulled up to reveal the soft curve of her neck.

Willem gulped and hefted a sack of sugar from the ground.

Lydia eyed the sack. "Too bad I didn't learn to make Kouign Amann from your bakery friend."

Willem waved away her regret. "The men coming here expect down home cooking, not French pastries. They'll be so tired from being real men, they'll eat anything put in front of them."

Lydia placed her hands on her hips. "And who will be putting this food in front of them?"

Willem bit his lip. He'd meant to broach the subject of hiring her as they made their way to town, but seeing her and Luc in the kitchen had crushed his confidence.

"I did mean to ask if you were looking for a bit of work. I'd pay you, of course." Willem rushed to add the last bit, so she understood when he said *work*, he meant pay and not just more chores. "Only if

you feel like you could handle it. I don't wish to take you from Milo and Bridget or from anything else you wish to do. I can hire it out. Bastien suggested the younger Morris girl. Or perhaps I could beg Mrs. Archer to send Edna out to us."

Lydia placed a soft hand on his arm. "Slow down. I can see you have ideas. I'm happy to help out for however long I can."

He blinked, curiously unsatisfied with her amiability. He cleared his throat. "And I'll pay you, whatever you want, plus some. I know you'd be doing me a favor. Bastien said I was not to make you feel obligated, that you are here as a guest to them."

Lydia pressed her lips, in an adorable thoughtful pout. "I don't wish to be their guest indefinitely. You know this." She nodded. "I'd love the work."

Her acceptance made something flutter in his belly. Maybe it was her use of the word love. He drew a deep breath, hoping to clear away his thoughts. As he loaded the items she'd selected into the wagon, he thought of Ivete and Angelica after a dance. They would sit with their heads together and giggle about the men they'd danced with. Was he becoming just as ridiculous when it came to Lydia? But their laughter was easier. As women, they would be cared for by whomever they accepted. As the man, Willem would take on the burden of caring for whomever he chose. He brushed the dust from his hands, wishing he could dust off his feelings as easily. He'd be glad to get back to the ranch and the work that kept his mind busy and unable to walk these confusing circles.



Chapter 12



Lydia watched Willem breeze from the shop as though a load had been lifted. Della accused him of not thinking ahead, yet when the words regarding his plans for the ranch tumbled out of him, Lydia could see he'd given this much thought. His cares might be eased, but Lydia wasn't sure how she felt.

She'd missed Willem's friendship since their return to Aster Ridge. When he'd changed plans and decided to accompany her to town, Lydia had worked hard to suppress her smile. As they'd ridden to town she almost felt like they were back in Chicago again. Willem spoke of the ranch and teased her about finding an excuse to wear her bridesmaid dress.

But now, his professional need for her doused her joy. Had he ever enjoyed her company? Or was his commitment to her in Chicago merely obedience to his mother? Was his attention today due to his need of a maid for his ranch? She wished she could ask him how he felt about her. What he wanted from her. But if she did, she'd reveal herself for a fool. Hadn't he just told her what he wanted from her? He wanted a servant to complete his ranch, to please those city men who were used to food appearing without effort. He needed someone to wash their clothes and sweep their floors. And, of course, she would do it. Hadn't she been looking for just such a chance? Something she could do to support herself without going to the Skinner's and separating from her children.

She should be glad she was capable of fulfilling the task he needed done. In Chicago he'd revealed his desire to be needed. Lydia had no such desires. Her two children needed her plenty. Instead she wanted someone whose company she enjoyed, who enjoyed her company in return. She wanted an equal. Not a master. Yet, in giving her services to Willem, she might become her own master. If she were able to keep up with the demand and the pay was enough, she might move to a cabin of her own, leaving the Graham's their guesthouse once more.

She ignored the drop of sadness in her heart and counted her blessings. The prospect of employment in a way that allowed her children to stay close answered her prayers. Willem would be her employer, and she couldn't want for anything more. But as she and Willem drove home, she couldn't ignore the heat that singed her arm every time they brushed against one another, a sizzle that whispered

and mocked her heart.

When they arrived at the house, Eloise rushed to Lydia's side. "I was afraid you'd decided against the dance. Della said she'll tend Milo and Bridget. Go get changed. Otto is waiting for us at home."

Lydia's heart galloped in her chest as she rushed to change into one of the gowns Della had given her. A flicker of her younger self attempted to shine forth when she pulled the pins out of her hair, letting it cascade down her back. As she smoothed the loose hairs away from her face, she surveyed the lines that stretched from the edge of her nose to the corners of her lips. Was she really going to make such a statement? Eloise was right, she didn't have to get married tonight, but just going would be like raising a flag. She pulled her hair into a low bun and replaced the pins. With one last deep breath, she looked into the mirror and tried to see what a man would see. Would he deem her worth the hassle? Or would he choose another maid far prettier and with fewer burdens?

She exited the house to find Eloise and Luc standing next to a pair of horses. Luc stepped forward. "Otto said these mounts were waiting for you two ladies."

Lydia glanced at his suit, and though he always dressed impeccably, he had yet to wear a tie to dinner.

Luc continued. "I would have saddled my own, but Willem needed help unloading his goods. I'd like to accompany you. Sahara here can handle two riders." He patted the Palomino on the neck. The horse certainly looked large enough to carry two women.

Eloise gave Lydia an apologetic smile.

Lydia grinned back. She held no bitterness. She, too, could not resist a determined Luc. The horse stepped toward Lydia, and she stroked his velvet nose. "Feeling strong today, sir?"

Luc touched her arm. "Up you go." She used the stirrup and climbed up.

She slid her boots out of the stirrups so Eloise could get on. "Eloise, would you prefer front or back?"

She'd hardly finished speaking when the saddle shifted, and Luc landed behind her with a huff. "It would be ungentlemanly to ride alone while you two ladies double up. We'll give Eloise her own horse."

She tensed as Luc leaned forward to gather the reins. His breath blew hot on her neck before he leaned back again. With a click of his tongue, he turned the horse for the road. Eloise caught up and rode on their side.

Lydia wondered if her muscles could handle staying this rigid the entire way to town. She should have just stayed in Dragonfly Creek and waited for the dance to begin. Her trip with Willem had driven

the dance entirely out of her mind. No small feat when one considered the prospect of the dance had given her a night of restless sleep.

Willem stepped out from the side of the bunkhouse as they passed, as if summoned by her thoughts. He cocked his head in question.

Luc waved. "Off to have a bit of fun. Do you remember what that is like?" Luc stopped the horse.

Lydia burned with the knowledge she sat inappropriately close to a married man.

Eloise's voice called out, sweet as honey. "There's a barn dance in town. Luc thought to accompany Lydia and myself."

"That's very generous of him." Willem's voice was hard.

Lydia gulped.

He came forward. "Eloise, do you mind sharing your horse?"

Eloise rushed to scoot to the front of the saddle, and Willem mounted behind her.

Luc laughed and gestured to Willem. "The way you're dressed, folks will think you're a local. You'll blend right in." He kicked the horse into a trot towards the Wilcox's farm where Eloise's brothers would surely be perplexed by two double riders coming from a ranch that bred horses.



WILLEM HAD TO FORCE himself not to gallop the entire way to the dance. He knew Luc well enough to know his brother would have raced him, but the women would have hated them for their immaturity. They arrived at the Wilcox's home. Luc dismounted and Willem could finally breathe as air opened up between Luc's and Lydia's bodies.

Townsfolk greeted Eloise, and the rest of the group as her guests. Eloise took every chance to tell the people that Lydia was a resident, while Willem and Luc were visiting their brother Bastien Graham. Willem watched Eloise's actions and wondered if she feared the townsfolk might think Lydia was already claimed by Luc or himself. Indeed, Luc never strayed farther than arm's-reach from Lydia.

The older Morris boys, Hugh and Lachlan greeted Willem with warmth. He was satisfied to see Luc rolling his shoulders in a way that spoke to his discomfort. He may have come for Lydia, but he would have to endure a host of farmers. Luc didn't possess Willem's ability to mingle with strangers. Luc was accustomed to riding on their family's coattails, of being important not because he'd done anything spectacular or because he was overly interesting, but because he was a Graham.

Willem smirked at his brother and let the Morris boys lead him over to a barrel of beer surrounded by many of the married men. The

townsfolk had plenty of questions regarding Willem's Gentleman's Ranch. The Morris's had spread the word throughout the town of Dragonfly Creek. It seemed whenever Willem was looking to build another bunkhouse, he'd have plenty of hands willing to do the work in exchange for some cash.

Before he knew it a violin struck a loud chord signaling the first dance. Willem spun. Luc already had Lydia's hand and was leading her onto the floor. Of course. She smiled at her partner. There had been a time when only he could coax that smile. Or so he'd thought. He ground his teeth. Could a word from any man here earn that smile, or did she prefer men with the last name of Graham?

He scanned the crowd for Eloise. She had a partner as well. With a deep sigh he settled his dark look on Lydia and let her every movement mark his soul.

The song ended and Willem marched to Lydia. She grinned as Luc led her off the floor. When she saw Willem, her face fell.

He held out a hand, and she took it without a word. He watched her closely to see if she would show any remorse at separating from Luc.

She held Willem's gaze, not smiling. Her gaze was as intense as his own. He realized he was glaring at her and relaxed his scowl. Once he did, she held her arms up, ready to dance. Another chord played, and he pulled her to him. She followed his lead with the same grace as she had the night of Ivete's wedding. The song picked up speed and the men and women along the side of the dance floor began stomping their feet. Willem felt the sound pulse in his chest and some of his anger ebbed. He spun Lydia and when she came back to him, her eyes were guarded. They didn't hold the intensity from before, but they weren't light either. As angry as he was when she gave Luc attention, he hated the thought of causing this woman any more grief. He'd worked so hard last fall to earn her smiles and now he took them from her. And why? Because Luc had set his sights on her? She didn't seek Luc out. Luc was the one who stalked the kitchen like some cougar in the hills.

He tried to shake off his anger, to realize it was inappropriate to direct it at her. She had a point. He was different here than he had been in Chicago. He tried to look at himself the way Lydia must look at him. A man desperate to prove himself, caught between worlds unsure which one he belonged to.

The fiddles stopped and they walked to the edge of the dance floor. Eloise met them and put a hand on Lydia's arm as she spoke to Willem. "You and Luc have had your turn. It's time for everyone else to meet Lydia."

The two women turned away from him. The moment her intense

stare left him, he breathed a sigh of relief. He got the sense that she knew more of him than he would ever know of her. Even when they were in Chicago and making his many visits both social and business, she'd considered his movements like a cat watches the grass moving in the wind. Not because it wants to attack the blades, but it is watching for something else. Something beyond the grass. What that was Willem might never discover.

But he wanted to. More than anything else. More, even, than building his ranch. He wanted to discover every facet of Lydia Skinner. But he couldn't if she succumbed to Luc's charms. Or decided a local man was the best, safest option for marriage.

When the festivities were over, the Morris family loaded into their wagon. Lydia joined Eloise in the wagon while Willem and Luc each rode their own horses. His resentment for his brother had lessened when Willem saw how the men of Dragonfly Creek circled Lydia. Luc was married. He should not even be considered competition. Willem's real competition was the many eligible men who lived locally. Many of them would likely provide Lydia with the life she had lost with Simon. But while Willem might not be independent enough for the women in Chicago, would he be enough for Lydia? If she'd lived as a miner's wife, surely she wouldn't mind marriage to even a failing Graham. He shook his head. The idea of her settling for him made his stomach turn. If she'd loved him, that would be another matter, but to convince her she couldn't do better than him would be more up Luc's alley. Willem wanted the best for her, even if it wasn't him.

He glanced at her, leaning in and talking with Eloise. Once again, Willem recalled how Angelica and Ivete would discuss the dance and which partner they preferred. Luc was too far away to hear, blissfully confident and not caring whether or not Lydia spoke of him. Willem on the other hand, nudged his mount closer. The wagon wheels in the dirt were too loud for him to hear at an inconspicuous distance. He turned away, recalling the men she had danced with. With a nod he decided he would focus on preventing any other men from courting Lydia. Now that he'd hired her for his ranch, she had no need to be married. She could continue to live at Bastien's with an income of her own.

When they arrived at the Morris home, Otto offered Lydia his horse and said he'd collect it in the morning, but Lydia waved him away. She walked directly to Willem and raised her eyebrows at him. He slid his foot from the stirrup and she gripped the saddle horn. Before she could climb up, a piercing scream came from the barn. Lydia's wild eyes met Willem's for a moment before she turned and ran toward the commotion. Willem was on her heels and they entered the barn in time to see Otto holding a lantern aloft. The light

illuminated a man lying in the hay, caked in dirt and blood. Eloise turned away and Lydia did the same, both of them averting their gaze from the gruesome scene.

“Is he dead?” Willem asked.

Hugh and Lachlan ran from the other end of the stable, skidding to a halt when they saw the corpse.

Lydia whimpered, and Willem instinctively wrapped his arm around her. He turned her away and pulled Eloise against him. With an arm around each lady he led them from the barn.

Luc ambled towards the hubbub, picking something from his teeth. “What’s all the screaming about?”

“There’s a dead man. From the looks of it, he used his last breath to seek refuge in their barn.”

Eloise shuddered, and Lydia glared at Willem.

He winced and quickened his pace. “Let’s get you ladies inside.”

Willem glanced over his shoulder. Luc continued on into the barn.

“What in heaven’s name happened?”

The startled question whipped Willem’s attention away from his brother.

Mrs. Morris rushed toward them, waving her hands in front of her. “I heard the scream.”

“Eloise is distraught, ma’am, and needs to lie down,” Lydia said.

Mrs. Morris raised a shaking hand and pointed them inside the house. “Bedroom’s that way.” They followed her vague directions inside the house.

Once over the threshold Lydia took Eloise and Willem turned to Mrs. Morris in the living area. “They found a dead man in the barn.”

Mrs. Morris’s hands flew to her wide-open mouth. “Oh.”

A booming male voice came from a back bedroom. “What’s going on?”

Mrs. Morris shook away the shock and hurried into the bedroom where Mr. Morris presumably lay. Bastien had mentioned Mr. Morris’s paralysis but none of the Graham’s had yet met or even seen the man.

Rather than wait for Mrs. Morris’s return, Willem hustled to the barn to see what he could do. When he entered, he found the dead man on his back and Otto had his ear to the man’s chest. “I think he’s breathin’.”

Lachlan, the oldest sibling, stepped forward. “Let’s get him in the house. Whether it be for tendin’ or buryin’ he’ll need to be cleaned up.” He squatted down and gripped the man under his arms. Otto and Hugh each took a leg and the brothers lifted the body, walking him toward the house. Willem jogged ahead and opened the door.

Mrs. Morris came out of the bedroom, her eyes widened at the corpse that might not actually be a corpse. She saw their intention and

rushed to clear off the table.

She grimaced. "He's filthy."

They placed him on the table. Hugh looked at Lachlan. "It's almost a shame to clean 'im before buryin' him."

Lachlan growled, "He ain't dead."

The man's eyelid twitched, and Willem jumped to him. "Can you hear me, man?"

Nothing.

Willem looked at the room. All eyes were on him. "I thought I saw him move. I guess ..."

Mrs. Morris clicked her tongue. "We best clean him up." She nodded to Otto. "I need clean water." To Hugh, she said, "Rags." Then to Lachlan, "Check on your sister, then bring me a sheet. We've got to get these grubby clothes off him."

Her sons rushed to do her bidding.

Willem stepped forward. "What can I do?" She ran her gaze down him as though wondering what he was doing in her house. Then, with a sharp nod she glanced at the man's feet. "Get to work on those boots. Cut the laces if you need."

Willem didn't carry a knife like the Morris boys did. He tried to unlace the knots but the laces were so shredded it was as though the man had crawled through a river, up a muddy bank then over a mile on sharp rocks. Hugh returned with rags and Willem begged the knife from his hip.

The laces were the least of Willem's troubles. When they were cut the shoe was still glued to the man's feet.

Otto returned with a bucket of water, and Willem asked for another. Maybe if he poured water over them, it would loosen the caked mud inside the shoes, and he'd be able to separate the foot from the boot.

Mrs. Morris dabbed at the man's head, then drew in a sharp breath. "Fresh blood. Hugh, get my sewing kit. Willem, help me clear the mud from this wound."

Willem gulped. He'd never tended someone else's wound, hardly even his own. They'd always had the doctor deal with anything more than a scratch.

Lachlan returned. "The girls are all asleep, even Lydia."

Mrs. Morris didn't even spare her son a glance. "Heavens, Willem, let's just pour the water. Slowly, while I wipe."

Willem tilted the bucket so a slow stream hit the man's forehead.

Mrs. Morris said, "Lach, come keep the water out of his nose. No use sewing him up if he's going to drown."

Soon the man's hair hung free of the globby mud, revealing a cut that slashed to the bone. Willem set the bucket down and stepped

away. His feet squelched in the water and mud that now covered the floor. Any semblance of fatigue he'd felt on the ride here had long gone. Adrenaline zipped through his veins, giving him energy and ideas. He pulled the towel from the counter and caught Otto coming in with yet another bucket of water. "Where can I find more towels?"

"Second drawer on the right." Otto nodded towards the kitchen and returned to the man.

When Willem returned, Hugh held a lantern near the man's head while Mrs. Morris held a needle above the large gash.

Willem reached out a hand. "Wait. I've heard to use alcohol to clean a cut. Have you any?"

Mrs. Morris kept her eyes on her work, but jerked her head towards the back of the house. "The boys've a bit of hooch in their room." Hugh's mouth opened with a pop and he almost dropped the lantern. Lachlan gulped then jogged off to collect the alcohol. He returned, passing it to Willem.

Willem should have known with the idea would come the work. He swallowed through his dry throat and took up his position from before, only this time he would be pouring cheap alcohol on the man's face.

"Lachlan, let's try not to get any in his eyes." The brother made a seal against the man's forehead and Willem poured. The man gasped and lurched, trying to sit up from the table. Someone cried out as everyone except Hugh, who held the light, tackled him back down again and by the time the commotion ceased, the man lay unconscious again.

Hugh laughed. "Guess you were right, Lach. He's alive."

Mrs. Morris leaned over the cut once more. "He'll be glad to be asleep. Willem, hold the skin together while I throw a few stitches."

Willem did as commanded but looked away. He tried to imagine he held anything except human flesh. The only memory that came powerful enough to hold his attention was the image of Lydia riding with Luc. He imagined her now, sleeping next to Eloise, exhausted from a night of dancing with all the eligible men in the county. Remembered her leaning against him as she reeled at the gruesome sight of this stranger.

When the cut was sewn shut, they removed his clothes. Mrs. Morris was no shy maiden, and once he was stripped naked they hauled him back outside.

Willem glanced around. Luc's horse was gone. Probably back to Bastien's. Apparently, his brother held no interest in tending a dead man.

Mrs. Morris poured water over his body. Since the Morris boys held him the same way they carried him in, it was Willem's job to use

a rag to scrub the mud off. Once the pitcher ran out of water Mrs. Morris nodded and turned back for the house. The men traded glances before following her inside. She laid a blanket on the floor near the hearth. It wasn't lit, the night being warm enough already, but her choice of spot must have come from habit. He wondered if she'd tended other wounded men. Her own husband, likely, provided the experience she showed. She was a strong woman indeed.

They laid him on the blanket, and she covered him with another. Mrs. Morris stood at his feet, with her hands on her wide hips. "There's naught to do tonight. You boys get some rest. I'll keep an eye." She focused on Willem. "Lydia is asleep. Shall I wake her, or we can bring her by in the morning on our way to services?"

Willem chewed his lip. He could sleep out in the guesthouse with Bridget and Milo. "Let her sleep."

Willem returned to his horse. Luc must have tethered it before he left. The ride home was quiet. Just what he needed on the heels of the evening's events. His mind swirled with the sheer wildness of the west. It was adventure for sure, but would he be able to run a business in these untamed prairies? Would his guests be robbed on their way? What if this man had been a guest making his way to Aster Ridge? One death and any business ideals he had would be long gone.

No man would seek an adventure that might cost him his life.

Willem's shoulders sagged as his horse clopped along the path. Should he quit now, before he failed, before someone died? But Bastien lived here with his family, surely it wasn't wild and dangerous all the time. His pride rose up, like a rearing mustang refusing to be tamed. If he gave up on the ranch, what would be left for him? To live his life as second fiddle to Luc working for their father? If he did, perhaps he could provide Lydia with a stable proposal, but would she even want to marry a man like him? The lesser brother, the failure. She wasn't the type to marry the first man who came along. She would have requirements, expectations. Willem just needed to figure out what those were.



Chapter 13



Lydia woke in the morning alone in a strange bed. It took several moments of blinking at her surroundings for her to realize where she was. The faded gingham curtains with patches sewn over the holes let in the soft morning light. She'd slept in her dress, so she had only to shake out the wrinkles before joining the Morris family in the kitchen. Mr. Morris sat in an armchair by the fireplace. At his feet was a lump of quilts. She stared at the lump and almost turned away before she realized the blankets were the man from last night.

"Is he alive?" she asked the room.

Mr. Morris dropped his gaze to the lump of quilts and picked at his fingers. "He's alive. Oft times a man has more life in him than he'd like."

Mrs. Morris looked at her husband with a sad smile but spoke softly to Lydia. "Come sit down dear. Would you like to attend services with us this morn?"

Lydia looked at the family, all dressed in their Sunday best. "I must relieve Della of my children."

"Very well." Mrs. Morris nodded towards the empty seat at the table and placed a bowl of gruel before it.

Lydia sat and smiled at the family. She had yet to meet the youngest Morris child, Fay. The girl was as pretty as her sister but with a stronger jaw like her brothers.

As they ate, the brothers laughed about the commotion of last night—Eloise's scream and how, after they'd brought him inside, their new guest had woken for long enough to embarrass every man in the room.

Lydia scraped the last spoonful of breakfast from her bowl when Mrs. Morris clapped her hands. "It's time to load up." She turned to her husband. "Don't you let him die while we're away." Her eyes twinkled, but her husband's stony face held no such mirth.

Lydia stole a glance at Mrs. Morris with a pang of affection. The woman knew what it was to survive in a world shaped for men.

She climbed up into the seat next to her oldest son, Lachlan. Lydia wished Milo were just five years older. If fate could have given her five more years with Simon, she might have been able to survive on her own terms, allowed herself ample time to grieve his death. To find a man she wanted to marry instead of needed.

Once everyone was piled into the wagon, Lachlan slapped the reins and Lydia breathed the thoughts away as he drove to Aster Ridge.

When they reached the house, Willem stood rooted in the yard as though he'd been waiting for them. Her heart soared to think of him anticipating her return. Lydia found her footing on the wagon wheel as she climbed down. She heard the crunch of rocks under feet and felt Willem's hands slide around her waist, guiding her safely to the ground. She glanced at him but he looked at Lachlan. "How does he fare?"

Lachlan shrugged. "He's still alive."

Willem nodded and Lachlan snapped the reins. The wagon moved along, headed for the church in Dragonfly Creek.

Willem turned to Lydia and they walked side-by-side toward the house. "Would you like some breakfast before we head into town?"

Lydia smoothed her skirts, impossibly wrinkled and inappropriate for church services. "I ate with the Morrises, but I don't know if I'll make it in time. My children aren't ready, and I must change too."

"Della and I readied the children. I couldn't remember whether Mrs. Morris said you'd meet us at church, or before." He smiled at her shocked expression. "I *can* be helpful when I set my mind to it. You go change and I'll meet you at the wagon with the children."

Thank heavens for her second dress. It was nice to have clothing she didn't wear during the week, though Della wore hers during chores and tried to convince Lydia to do the same. The other gown was sage green, and it almost fooled onlookers into thinking her eyes held a hint of a shade other than muddy brown. The green suited her. And reminded her of something ... of someone. Like an egg dropping to the ground, realization came in an instant. The dress was the exact shade as the inner part of Willem's eyes. She hugged her arms around her waist. She'd not be able to wear it without thinking of him.

He was kind and doting, but she knew he'd been angry with her last night. Perhaps for riding with Luc. Perhaps for going to the dance at all. Should she have invited him? Voices drifted in from the yard. She pushed away her doubts. Time for Sunday worship.

What would Christ think of her musings? What would he do in her situation? Would he even worry for the children? Or would he carry on without any real intention, knowing whatever happened did so because of some grand plan? She shook her head. Miracles like that weren't for *her* life. And yet ... she was provided for. Safe. The Lord had provided Bastien and Della and maybe he had provided Willem as well.



WILLEM WISHED HE COULD keep his hands on Lydia the entire way

to town. Instead, he handed her into the wagon, then climbed in next to her. Luc and Bastien sat on the upper seat with Bastien leading the team. Even grumpy Garrick joined them, dressed in his shabby Sunday best.

Willem studied Lydia's profile. "How did you sleep?"

"Horrible. Eloise tossed and turned all night. She had quite a shock, and I worried about Milo and Bridget. Why did you leave me there?"

Willem spluttered, "I— Mrs. Morris suggested letting you sleep. I thought I was doing right."

Lydia shifted. "Well, a mother doesn't like to be away from her children."

Her words stung. Willem knew nothing of being a parent, of keeping children safe. He turned away. Surely the first thing Lydia would be searching for was a man who could care for both her and her children.

As though on cue, Bridget slid from her spot next to Milo and onto Lydia's lap. She grinned her dimpled smile at Willem and waved, her whole hand bending at the wrist. "Hi, Papa."

Her words filled Willem with that familiar sense of belonging. But Lydia pressed her fingers over Bridget's mouth and leaned forward to speak into the child's ear. "Darling, he is not your papa. This is our dear friend *Willem*."

"Papa," Bridget said, then flashed her dimples at her mother.

Lydia turned pleading eyes on Willem. "I don't know how to tell her."

The words *then don't* came to his mind and he slapped them away. "She'll grow out of it." The statement, true enough, made his stomach sink. In time Lydia would find a husband. One who knew how to care for her children, one who had a career, or a successful business. There were plenty of wealthy ranchers in this territory who would warm at the chance to wed a woman like Lydia. Men who weren't the most immature and foolhardy of the bunch and trying to start up a venture that was as likely to fail as it was to succeed.

Willem turned his face to the scenery as they rode. He silently cursed himself for the years he'd spent trying to keep up with Luc and Bastien at the clubs. He'd always been poor at cards, and yet he'd continued to visit, running up several debts father had to pay off. Actions like that had only lessened him in his father's eyes. Worst of all, Willem knew his father despised the young men, sons of his friends, who never learned a trade and instead rode the coattails of their family money. Father asked that each of his sons learn a trade before they were given their inheritance. Luc had stepped right into father's shoes, running the family business. Bastien had gone rogue,

learning the trade of mining, only to forego that profession and begin a ranch of his own. Willem wasn't sure what his gentleman's ranch counted as. Did his father believe it was a business, or did he consider it a silly idea? At what point would it be acceptable to forge a unique path? Or would his father only grant him inheritance if he followed a surer path, one already forged and proven by others?

He heaved a sigh, such was the lot of a younger brother. Always looking up and wondering when he would measure up. And now he faced those same insecurities when it came to Lydia. Would she see him as a man worthy of her and her children?



WHEN THEY ARRIVED BACK at the ranch after services, Della and Lydia went directly into the house. Willem's stomach grumbled. Maybe he could sneak a bite while he waited for the meal. Della always made a large supper on Sundays, and he loved entering the house to the smell of roast in the oven with carrots and potatoes on the side. It had been months since he'd eaten one of Della's meals. First, he'd been in Chicago, then she and Bastien ran off to rescue her ungrateful brother in Omaha. Eloise had made most of the meals those days.

When he entered the house, Della's incredulous voice rang throughout the house. "You're going to Roberta's? You can't stand that woman."

Willem stopped in the entry, unsure whether or not to enter the kitchen and disrupt their conversation. Alas, he wanted to hear Lydia's reply. Had she not committed to helping him? Was she still planning to go to Wyoming?

Lydia's voice drifted around the wall. "I know, but she is their grandmother. And I can't imagine what offense I am causing her now her son is gone."

"Do you think yourself strong enough? The reminders of Simon back home ... they'll be powerful. And didn't Simon take you away for a reason?"

Dishes clanked, then Lydia spoke, "I struggled after Milo's birth. Those were dark days when I was vulnerable. This time will be different."

Bastien came through the door and Willem jumped away from the wall. He sat on the bench and removed his shoes, as though that was his purpose for lingering in the entryway.

Bastien sat and removed his as well. "Are you going to see the dead man today?"

Willem kicked his boots under the bench and leaned back, spreading one arm along the back of the bench. "Nah. I'm sure the

Morris are taking great care.”

A pounding sounded on the door and both brothers exchanged glances before Bastien stood to open it.

Otto was doubled over, his hands braced just above his knees as he panted his message. “The man.” Breath. “He’s Harder.”

Willem stood and ambled to the door, squinting at Otto. “He’s what?”

Otto looked up. “Harder. Aaron Harder.”

The name meant nothing to Willem.

Bastien stiffened. “And he’s still alive?”

Otto nodded.

“Who’s Aaron Harder?” When he spoke the name, it had a familiar ring, but Willem couldn’t place it.

Della appeared behind them. “That horse thief had the nerve to come back this way. Serves him right to be on death’s door.”

Bastien looked at Otto. “What’re you going to do?”

“Pa says he ain’t figgerin’ to turn ‘im in. Says a man’s got a right to fight a fair fight on his own two feet.”

Willem turned to Della and spoke softly. “This the bandit who paid you a visit last year when Bastien was gone?”

Della nodded and took Bastien’s arm as though she needed comfort. The fire in her eyes didn’t reflect her cautious exterior. She turned her gaze on Willem. “Bastien had gone to bury his friend. We were all left to Harder’s mercy.”

Willem made a note to never cross Della.

Bastien stood. “Thank you. I respect your pa, and I won’t be doing anything against his wishes.”

Otto nodded. “Just thought you should know. Eloise about had a fit when she recognized him.”

Bastien crossed his arms. “Is his condition poor enough that your ma feels safe with him in her home?”

“Hasn’t blinked an eye since that night.” Otto nodded.

Willem wanted to shiver. The memory haunted him like a ghost come back to life.

Bastien slapped Otto on the back. “Keep us informed. If you need to miss work and help your ma, you just let me know.”

“Thanks, sir.” Otto fingered his hat and turned to go.

Bastien shut the door and heaved a sigh. “Thomas won’t be happy.”

Willem kicked his boots under the bench. “Do you think he was headed for Thomas’s place?”

Bastien drew a deep breath. “I would guess so.” He shook his head. “Thomas has a soft spot for his old friend, one I don’t know that I will ever understand.” He strode forward and put an arm around Della.

“Supper smells mighty nice. Maybe Eloise will be so busy caring for bandits that she’ll leave the cooking to you from now on.”

Willem followed the lovers into the house.

Della looked up at Bastien and asked, “Will Thomas be displeased about Harder’s return, or about his near-death condition?”

“Both, I suppose.”

They entered the kitchen to find Luc leaning back in his chair, both hands on the table as though this were his home and not Bastien’s. “So, the bandit is back. Willem, you might hire him to hold up a few of your guests, just for the experience. The infamous Aaron Harder tried to rob them, but their brave host Willem Graham came to the rescue just in time. Get a few blanks in your guns and you two could have a wild west shootout.”

Willem hated that he liked the idea. “And what? The man keeps coming back from the dead every time a new group comes? I think they’d figure that one out.” Willem weaved around Lydia as she worked in the kitchen and stole a diced potato from the pan.

“Sit down,” she chided. “We’re almost ready.”

Willem winked and left the kitchen. Bridget played with her blocks on the floor and Milo was nowhere to be seen. He surveyed the group. Garrick was also absent. He strode to the boy’s room and found both of them there. Garrick had removed his string tie from the Sunday service. Milo stood in the corner, seemingly content to just be in the older boy’s presence.

Willem walked over to Milo and tousled his hair. “Supper is almost ready. Go ahead and wash up.”

Milo jumped to do Willem’s bidding. The thought of the child taking a fancy to Garrick left a sour spot in Willem’s chest.

Willem turned to Garrick with a stern face. “You know, Milo is beginning to look up to you. That’s what little boys do.”

Garrick gave a hard laugh. “He doesn’t want to be like me.”

“No? A few missing fingers doesn’t mean much out here.”

Garrick picked at the ties on his quilt.

“You be sure to be someone he can look up to.” Willem gave him a smile. “See you at dinner.”

He moved back down the hall and when he reached Bridget, he scooped her into his arms and tossed her in the air. She gave a shriek of delight and begged for more with one of her few lisping words. Milo returned with clean hands and attached himself to Willem’s leg. He pretended to fall and let the children tackle him. Garrick walked past them, and Willem was glad the boy decided to join them for supper. Willem was going back to Chicago eventually and Milo would need someone to look up to. Only, would Milo still be here? Willem had missed the rest of Lydia’s conversation with Della. Was she

moving to Wyoming, or working for him? The thought stuck in his throat no matter how he tried to swallow it down.

He surveyed the scene of Bastien's house, filled with people all ready for a Sunday meal.

She didn't need to go to Wyoming. She had a home and food and friends. A job. Her children were dressed well and loved by everyone around them. To think she planned to go to her in-laws and consider giving away everything she had here ... he shook his head. He couldn't understand her. Everyone lived off others at some point in their lives. She claimed family should be the ones responsible, but looking around the dinner table, save Luc, Willem couldn't picture a better family for Lydia and her children. Worse, if what he'd overheard between Lydia and Della was true, her mother-in-law was a pain to be around. He would talk to her, convince her she didn't need to go.



Chapter 14



On the day the first guests' carriage was to arrive, everyone was strung tight as a hunter's bow. Willem most of all. His usual lightness had disappeared, and Garrick's sullen attitude further darkened the household.

The tension in the household rolled like a heavy thundercloud and Lydia jumped at the chance of escape, offering to take a bowl of after-dinner scraps to the chicken coop.

"Hello, darlin'"

Lydia's shoulder hitched against her ears. Luc leaned against the doorway of the coop, grinning. "Are you ready for a bunch of rowdy gentlemen ready to play cowboys?"

Lydia laughed. "I don't think I'll ever be ready. I'll just have to stay out of their way." Actually, she was thrilled at the prospect of work and pay. She'd never been paid in her life, save small gifts as a thank you for a favor.

Luc leaned against the coop, a smug smile on his face. "They'll not let you, you know. I suspect Charles Wilkinson is coming for you alone. He could've joined his regiment if he was in search of adventure."

Lydia shook her head, unsure what drew men into adventures while she merely hoped to survive. "Surely this type of adventure has the draw of fun without threat to life. He must be coming because Willem has promised a taste of the wild west."

"I tell you. What he wants, Willem would never promise." Luc ran a finger from her shoulder to her elbow.

Lydia gulped, drawing away. "Luc," she said firmly, hoping her voice held the warning she intended. She left for the house, and prayed he wouldn't follow.

As she neared the house she lifted her hand to her brow as she squinted down the road. A coach was making dust. Willem's visitors. She called the news to the house. One by one, members of the household joined her and stood to greet the guests. Eloise had even succeeded in the task of coaxing Garrick from his room.

As they pulled to a stop a man looked out the window then exited the coach. Charles Wilkinson. Luc smirked. Another, rounder man followed close behind, she thought she remembered him as Mr. Bennon.

“Welcome.” Willem grinned. “Are you boys ready to live like men?” He gestured to their suitcases. “Grab those and follow me.”

Lydia watched them walk off, a warm note of respect humming in her core.

Bastien said the words she was thinking. “Only Willem could get men to pay to carry their own luggage.”



WILLEM ROLLED FROM his bed, grateful the sun was finally up. He’d struggled to sleep as he stressed about the morning. Would he always be this uncertain when guests were at the ranch? Since there were only two guests so far, Bastien and Luc joined them for breakfast in the bunkhouse. Lydia, Eloise and Della helped serve food while Garrick stayed back with the children. Willem noticed the way Charles’s eyes raked each woman, lingering on Lydia. Though Eloise was as suitable an option for his wandering gaze, he hardly removed it from Lydia. She was his clear preference. He tugged at his collar and stood. The food was all served and he followed the women back to the main house as if he were herding chickens into the coop to keep them safe from hungry foxes. “I don’t wish for you to serve us. If you’ll just deliver the food whenever it’s ready, I can set it up for the men.”

Della linked her arm with Willem’s, a wide smile on her face. “We’re all as excited about this as you are. You’ve done good work, brother.”

Willem forced a grin. Della had nothing to fear from these men. None but a mad man would risk Bastien’s displeasure. Eloise and Lydia, though, had no obvious claim and were therefore open to the men’s advances. He shook his head, he should have found an old woman to do this job.

By the week’s end, the rest of the guests had arrived, and all six bunkhouse beds were filled. Willem had enlisted every hand on the farm, including Garrick, to help setup for the dance. Every one of the Morris children were there too. The project for the week had been to build a raised dance floor. It boasted tall posts at the four corners which would hold lanterns, and a bench for the musicians. Willem had hired a band from a neighboring town that had fiddles— an instrument Lydia claimed was necessary for a country dance.

He found Lydia on the newly finished dance floor on her tiptoes, trying to hang a swath of garland from one post to another. Willem scooped the branch and hung it on the nail with ease.

“Being tall does have its advantages.” Lydia smirked, placing her hands on her hips and surveying the space. “This will be fun tonight. With all the food we’ve made, I hope the county will find their way here.”

“Will you wear one of your dresses from Ivete? Did I not promise to give you reason to wear them again?”

Lydia laughed. The sound was clear and full. Her newfound lightness entranced him. She shook her head. “I can’t wear them here. They’d think I’m putting on airs.”

“Does it matter what they think? And besides, you are not putting on airs. That is a dress in your wardrobe. It would be foolish to let it sit unused during such an opportunity.”

Lydia pressed her lips but didn’t argue. “And will you wear your tuxedo?”

Willem laughed. “I did not bring it. I admit I did not think I’d have use for it out here.”

Lydia nodded. “There you have it. This is not the place for such formal attire. Now, stop making me feel guilty and help me with this other side.”

Willem did Lydia’s bidding until Luc called and waved him over to the house. As he left, he took one last look at her lithe frame bending and stretching as she decorated the dancefloor. Before he rounded the corner, putting her out of sight, Charles Wilkinson joined her. Willem clenched his jaw, torn between wishing that man would have the time of his life and wishing he would never return.

Hours before the dance was to begin, a wagon approached the ranch, drawing the gaze of everyone at work outside. The sun caught on a flash of auburn hair braided over one shoulder and at once Willem knew it was Ivete and Thomas, home from their honeymoon.

When the wagon stopped in front of the house, Willem reached up a hand to help Ivete down. “We’ve a load of lumber for our stable, but I begged Thomas to let us stop for the dance. We can unload lumber tomorrow. Today, I wish to celebrate with my family.”

Willem nodded at Thomas, whose placating smile told Willem he’d rather be unloading lumber.

He sidled up to his new brother-in-law and whispered conspiratorially. “I’ll help you with it first thing in the morning. I’ve a crew of workers now.” He chuckled. “My guests are all readying for dinner. If you’re going to stay, you better come in and get ready too.”

As they strode across the yard, Willem remembered the Morris’ guest. “Did you hear your old friend Aaron Harder is here?”

Thomas whipped his head around.

Willem laughed. “Yup. Collapsed near dead in the Morris’ barn. They’ve been tending him.”

Thomas blinked, his mouth working as though he had too many questions. “How long?”

“About two weeks. I hear he’s up and about. I don’t think Eloise likes his company. Otto’s been complaining that she stays at Aster

Ridge later these days, hoping Harder will be asleep before she returns.”

Thomas shook his head. “Has he said why he’s back?”

“I suspect the bullet that took a piece of his skull’s got something to do with it.”

Thomas stopped, and looked back at his wagon, loaded with wood for his stable.

Willem slapped him on the back. “Take my horse. If you’re not back in time, I’ve plenty of gentlemen who would love to entertain your wife until your return.”

Thomas gave Willem a narrow look before jogging off to the stable.

After their supper, the men lounged on chairs set up around the dance floor.

Willem tapped his foot on the planks. “Good work, men. Many feet will stomp this wood and be glad for your efforts.”

A lean man, come up from modest means to join the Chicago elite, stretched. “My father would turn in his grave to see me working like this. He always told me, ‘get an education so you don’t have to work like I did.’” He sniffed. “But he doesn’t realize a man needs to work. Needs to feel the calluses on his hands and the strained muscles.”

The round Mr. Bennon laughed, his belly shaking. “I’ve strained muscles I didn’t know I possessed.” He faced Willem. “Will there be many girls here tonight? You are too protective of your hired girls.”

Charles crossed his ankles and spoke to Bennon. “You may just need to brush up your skills. Personally, I think I’m making headway with dear Lydia. She is hard as the steel in one of your factories, yet I think with enough pressure I can yet bend her to my will.”

Willem stood, wiping sweaty palms on his pants. Waiting for the dance proved to be more stressful than preparing for it. “Gentleman, there is a reason I’ve kept you from my staff. You may beg whatever you wish from the country girls, but I’ll not be able to keep a staff if everyone thinks I’m running some type of brothel.”

Charles glared at Willem. “But surely Lydia is exempt. She’s a widow.”

Willem recalled Luc’s words insinuating Lydia was marked because she had been married. He clenched his teeth, waiting for his anger to pass.

Charles continued. “And I began to pursue her back in Chicago. I might have done more, but even then Luc had his eye on her. I suppose without his wife around he is free to pursue any woman who strikes his fancy.” He leaned in, lowering his voice. “I saw them in the stables yesterday. I thought Lydia might let him kiss her.”

Willem curled his hand into a fist and cast around for Luc. Where

was he and was he pressing a kiss to her lips this very moment? The crunch of wheels on the dirt road caught his eye. "Our first guests. Please, excuse me."

As he crossed the yard he saw Della exit the house and greet the guests. Thank goodness. He had no patience for civility at the moment. Not with the image of Lydia kissing Luc seared into his mind. He ducked into the house. Where was Luc? Willem knew he would be good for nothing until he knew for sure whether or not his brother had kissed the only woman Willem wanted.



LYDIA WAS IN THE BUNKHOUSE tidying. The guests who came for the dance would surely want to look around at what Willem had built. So far, the bunkhouse was the main accomplishment. With the gentlemen lounging on the dance floor in their Sunday best it was the perfect time for her to gather their laundry and make the building appropriate for visitors.

Her knees screamed, but the bunkhouse floor needed a good wash. The mud tracked through the entrance would not take care of itself, and she would not let the townsfolk think Willem's enterprise a slovenly one. Willem needed a rug here, if only to save her back. She heard the click of the latch on the door and looked up.

Luc's broad frame darkened the doorway. "I thought I might find you here. Why aren't you readying for the dance?"

Lydia put a hand to her hair. She surely looked a mess from when she'd swept under the beds. She pressed up from her knees and shook the dirt from her skirt. "They're not coming to see me. I'll change once the bunkhouse is presentable."

"Not coming to see you? Are you sure?"

Lydia smiled away his compliment. She hefted the basket filled with dirty clothes from the floor and set it on the table. The dining area had a few towels to be washed and she gathered those, hoping Luc would either complete his mission in coming out here, or leave her to her duties.

"I wanted to speak with you." His voice sounded strangely timid, and Lydia couldn't help but tense at the change in his usual demeanor.

She kept her back to him as she asked, "We are speaking, are we not?"

"About the future. Your future."

Lydia bit the inside of her cheek. The future was something she constantly tried to forget, and here he was bringing it to her attention. She shook away the distraction and, taking one of the used rags, ran it along the hutch and the clean dishes it held.

Luc stepped closer. "I'm sure you are concerned about your future,

and I came to make you an offer.”

Lydia faced him. The rag hung down from a clenched fist set at her waist. She surveyed him with narrowed eyes.

His throat bobbed. “Come to Chicago. I’ll put you up in a house. Pay for schooling for Milo and Bridget. They’ll have a nurse.”

She wanted to feel revulsion, but all she felt was tired. Her hands were cracked, and her back ached.

Lydia could easily imagine the life his words painted. She recalled the schoolroom in Maxine’s great house. Was Luc’s home as well outfitted? Surely not, as he didn’t have any children. In any case, he wasn’t inviting her to live at his home, but a separate home away from his wife.

“You mean for me to be your mistress?”

Luc’s shoulders relaxed and he broke into a wide smile. He stepped nearer, his eyes searching her face. “Yes.” He breathed the word as though relieved she’d been the one to fully acknowledge his wish. “I can give you anything you need. Anything you want.”

Lydia knit her brows as she considered him like an actor on a stage. A sudden shame overtook her. Not at his proposal, which was shameful enough in itself, but at her behavior these past weeks. Was it so absurd that he ask this of her? True, he was a confident man, but she’d given him reason to think she was open to this idea. Laughing with him. Letting him tease her. That moment at the chicken coop when she’d only said his name as though it were warning enough. She should have made her position clear, should have pushed his hand away, ignored his compliments. Only, when she’d been in Chicago, Willem had bathed her in so much attention. He’d awoken something in her, something she hadn’t known since before Simon. That feeling of being the one to capture a man’s attention, of being the girl in the room who commanded the gaze of the most eligible man.

Once back in Aster Ridge, Willem’s attention had stopped, as though the change of scenery was water poured on the fire of his affection. Only smoke was left. Until Luc kindled a flame once more. But he wasn’t a bachelor at all. How had his attentions filled that void? Was it because by the time she left Chicago, she’d realized it was time to consider marriage once more? She’d thought his attention innocent, yet it had served to boost her sense of worth as she readied to be courted, to remind her she’d been pretty enough once and that beauty might serve her once again.

She lifted her chin and shook her head slowly in disbelief. “You think I would be your mistress?”

Luc made a face. “I know it isn’t the most desirable of lives, but I have fallen for you. I’ll do anything to have you for my own.”

Lydia let out a laugh. “You speak as though you’re in love with

me.” She shook her head. “You love your wife. You love yourself. I am merely a distraction. A dalliance missed.”

His features, which had softened as he tried to profess his care for her, turned hard. “I could make you happy. Give you more than any other. Do you think Willem loves you?”

He spoke Willem’s name with such disdain it caused a lump in Lydia’s chest. Did she think Willem loved her? Or that he could love her?

His mouth lifted into a sneer and he tilted his head to the side, as if studying a bug he planned to crush under his boot. “He only wants your labor, your toil. He wouldn’t nor *could* he, give you the life I can give you. This ranch might not fail, but it will never truly succeed. Not with Willem’s business practices.”

Lydia bristled at the thought of Willem’s venture going under, of her losing the only option for work. “What Willem has built is honest. It is a creation of his own that he can be proud of. I don’t know that it needs to succeed financially, for it has already transformed him.”

Luc let out a bitter laugh. “Transformed? You think him changed.” He ran his eyes down her frame in a way that caused her skin to itch. “He bet on you, you know. Bet he could have you before we left Chicago.”

Lydia’s cheeks heated. *Have* me? She wanted to deny Luc’s words, but as she opened her mouth to defend Willem, she recalled how he had draped her in attention while they were in Chicago, how his companionship ceased the moment they returned to Aster Ridge.

Luc dipped his face to meet her downcast eyes. “You know it’s true. But I’d wager you kept your distance from him in Chicago, the way you keep it from me now.” He reached a hand and touched her cheek. “A surer way to catch a man, I don’t know.”

Lydia pushed his hand away. “My answer is no.” She reached for the broom that leaned against the wall, bringing it between them like a barrier.

Luc flicked his gaze to the broom, an amused smile gracing his full lips. He was a handsome man, likely unfamiliar with rejection. “If ever you’re in Chicago again, I’ll understand your reason and I’ll come to you.” His eyes roved her face, and he licked his lips. Lydia took a step back, afraid the heat that rolled off him might reach her. That he might pull her to him and kiss her. Let him come. She’d survived the death of the man she loved, months of loneliness and grief, a mother-in-law who hated her, and the betrayal of a man she might be capable of loving. She’d survive Luc, too.



Chapter 15



Willem continued his search for Lydia. The kitchen was a hubbub of activity, but Lydia wasn't among them. He continued to the chicken coop and finally the stables. Nowhere. The bunkhouse loomed on the edge of the valley floor. He jogged across the tall grasses, the effort raising both his heart rate and his anxiety at what he would find. As he approached, Luc exited the door, tugging on the hem of his vest and tightening his tie. He had no reason to be straightening his clothing as he was not lodging in the bunkhouse. Luc raised his face and met Willem's gaze with a smirk. When their long legs brought them together Willem grabbed Luc's arm. "What were you doing?"

Luc pushed Willem away. "Your girl is in there. Hard at work where you like her."

A vein of anger spiked in Willem's chest, and he worked his jaw.

Luc strode away, his laughter echoing across the prairie.

Willem wanted to tackle him. Instead, he turned to the bunkhouse, desperate to lay eyes upon Lydia and settle his fears. Or confirm them.

A few long strides took Willem to the door and he yanked it open. "Lydia?" He called into the cabin.

Lydia appeared from the dining area, a broom in her hands. Despite being a bit dusty, she looked presentable, tidy even. She had no need of straightening her clothes as Luc had.

"Luc was just in here," Willem said.

"Yes, I know." Her voice was flat.

"What were you two doing?"

Her eyebrows twitched as her gaze fell to the floor. "He was speaking of his return to Chicago." She returned to sweeping the room, bending to get the floor under the chairs.

"Is that all? You weren't letting him kiss you? You know he's married." It wasn't a question and Willem hated the venom that entered his voice, the jealousy that ripped through him.

"I recall."

Willem stared at the broom moving along the floor. He strode to her and took hold of the handle. She held the handle firm and her eyes met his, filled with fire.

"Did he kiss you?" His words were hard.

Lydia met them with cutting words of her own. "And what if he did?" Her mouth pressed tight. Her eyes snapped with inexplicable

heat.

Willem harbored his own fire, and it raged hotter. It would consume everything in this valley if he let it. “Luc is...” Willem didn’t know how to describe his brother, and Lydia hadn’t answered his question. The question of the kiss beat a rhythm in his ears. He wanted to shout it at her, to shake the truth from her. He pulled the broom closer, and Lydia with it. “He’s not to be trusted.”

“No? He’s been rather kind to me.”

“I’ve been kind to you.”

Lydia bobbed her head. “Yes.”

“And you choose Luc.” With both their hands on the broom Willem could easily pull her closer and plant a kiss on her mouth. He might convince her to choose him, but he could not. Would not. Her willingness with Luc tasted sour in his mouth and for the first time he wondered about the other men calling her tainted. Her widowhood meant nothing to him, but her choice of partner meant everything.

“I choose nothing. I am a woman, a widow with young children and no finances to speak of. I do not have my pick of men.”

Willem rolled his shoulders. “Charles, Luc, me. I’d say you have your pick of every single man within five miles.”

Lydia jerked the broom, but Willem kept his hold. “None of you *men* have honest intentions.” She spat the word “men” as though their gender were a plague.

Willem’s voice grew to a bellow. “Luc’s intentions are the least honest of all.” The image of Luc and Lydia alone in here made him sick. Her refusal to answer was answer enough, and his stomach twisted. Luc had used his time at Willem’s ranch to woo Lydia. He wanted to tear from this bunkhouse and pummel him.

“I’d say he’s the *most* honest. Luc told me the truth. About the bet.”

Lydia pushed at the broom, letting it go so Willem stumbled backward. The breath flew from his lungs as he regained his footing. “It’s not ... I never—”

Lydia stared at him with hurt in her eyes. “*That* is truth. At least Luc isn’t afraid of who he is. Not like you, trying to prove yourself. And to who?”

He swatted away her questions like mosquitos on a summer night. Of course Luc had told her about the bet. Willem wouldn’t be surprised if Luc had made the bet with the very intent to ruin Willem in Lydia’s eyes. Willem was a fool for letting his guard down. For believing that night had been about celebrating Thomas. Luc’s cunning never took a night off.

Willem’s voice was hoarse when he spoke. “I made the bet, but I didn’t follow through— never even intended to. I was to kiss you while we were in Chicago.”

Lydia gave a hard laugh. "Is that why you paid me so much attention? It all but stopped the minute we arrived at Aster Ridge."

Willem opened his mouth, but the truth of her words hit him. He *had* stopped paying her so much attention when they arrived. "I had to get the bunkhouse built. You were busy, too. I was not neglectful." His words sounded weak even to his own ears.

"Of course you weren't. I wasn't yours to neglect. Yet, in Chicago I seemed to be yours to entertain. Was it only due to your mother's wishes?" She cocked her head and narrowed her eyes at him.

Willem opened his mouth, but Lydia cut in before he could speak.

"And why did you not kiss me in Chicago? I know you thought of it. It may be an age since I was courted, but I know the look a boy gives a girl."

He thought of her sitting in the yard with the sun on her face. He had wanted to kiss her, more times than he could count. Willem threw the broom to the side. "I did want to kiss you. Only you are so recently widowed, I thought it inappropriate."

Lydia lifted her chin, meeting his gaze, daring him to say the words he knew she feared. That she should still be grieving for her dead husband. But he would not speak Simon's name. Not now. Not when he wanted to drive her husband from her mind. He wanted to hear her speak his own name, to ask him to kiss her. He couldn't help his gaze flicking to her lips at the thought.

Lydia quirked a brow, apparently unaware of what he lusted after. "And now? Not two weeks later and you accuse me of kissing another, of moving on."

Rage flared in his chest. "I do not *accuse* you of moving on. Any accusation I might fling is to do with your choice of partner."

"And you believe I choose Luc?"

"It certainly seems so. You laugh with him and let him touch you." His stomach roiled. "It makes me sick."

Lydia's jaw flexed and she moved to place the broom in its spot in the corner of the room. "Then quit looking." She weaved past him. He longed to reach out to her, but he didn't trust the storm that raged inside him.



LYDIA STRODE FROM THE bunkhouse, hot tears filling her eyes. Willem was disgusted with her. As disgusted as she was with herself. Luc wasn't the only one to think she'd be his mistress. Willem thought it too. He must, for why else would he come in accusing her of kissing Luc? Her humiliation beat in her ears as she walked to the house. Eloise waved to her from the road, where a wagon was parked. Guests were arriving with their pies and candied fruits. Lydia should greet

them, but instead she fled to the guest house and to her bed. She poured her tears into the pillow and when they were done she turned to face her bedside table. The sight of Roberta's letter made her tears start again.

Lydia had waited to send a reply, waited to see if anything would come and prevent her from going to Wyoming. For a moment, she'd thought the work situation with Willem could be the solution to her problems. She'd been a fool. She'd almost thought a business arrangement between her and Willem might mean her children could have a figure in their life who they loved, and she could be independent. She should have realized that in working for him she'd given Willem power over her, a sense of ownership, of mastery.

Yet, he did not long for her, not in the way she'd begun to long for him. His words about Luc cut because they were true. She'd given Luc allowance with her. She knew he was fond of her, knew he had a wife, knew he enjoyed a romp with any maid who would have him. Only his attention felt good. When Willem had lent it in Chicago he'd stirred something in her, something that was now hungry. Even if she cast all hope for love and honor aside, and accepted Luc's proposal, she would never be satisfied with him.

She scoffed at Willem barging into the bunkhouse and demanding answers. Of course she'd not let Luc kiss her. Though, she knew many men who would have taken advantage of her in such a situation. But Luc was a man used to being wanted. He didn't have to take anything from an unwilling woman. He wanted her and was confident she would come to him in time.

Only she didn't want him. She always heard his flattery with a degree of amusement, possibly even an air of hopeful thinking, wishing it were not he, but Willem, who delivered such compliments. She wished herself back on that lawn in Chicago with the sun on their backs as Willem's gaze roved her figure when he thought she wasn't looking. He *did* want her. Lydia knew, as any woman knows, that gaze which lingers a half-second too long.

In Chicago, Lydia had watched as Willem gave his affection to anyone who lent him a smile. He wore his need to please all on his sleeve. He didn't belong to her alone, but Maxine had lent him for the duration of her visit. Like a fine set of earrings, the loan was expected to be returned at the end of her stay.

"Mama." Milo's voice came from another area of the house.

Lydia sniffed and wiped tears from her cheek. She sat up and smoothed her skirt, pressed her palms to her cheeks. Hopefully her face didn't reveal her trial. "In here. I'll be out in just a moment."

A small knock sounded, and Milo let himself in.

"Milo, you should wait for a lady to call her readiness before you

enter.”

He cocked his head to the side. “Mother, you’ve been crying.”

Lydia laughed through her shaking. “You aren’t easily fooled.”

He came near and put an arm around her waist. My, he was growing. He could reach the other side of her now and truly pull her in for comfort. “Is it Papa?”

“No, honey. It’s nothing. Sometimes mothers need to cry.”

“Is it Uncle Willem?”

Lydia’s eyes flashed to her son. “What do you mean?” The words tumbled out before she could stop them. She should stop any notions Milo had, but her curiosity struck like a rattler and steered the conversation in the other direction.

“I mean, Bridget might need a papa. She doesn’t remember ours.”

“Oh, honey. Bridget has everything she needs between you and me.”

“And I might like him too.” Milo’s words were quiet, as though he were afraid to speak them.

“We all like Willem. When the time is right, I might find a new daddy for you and Bridget. But for now, I want you to remember that Willem is a *friend* of ours.” She hoped.

“But Bridget likes to call him papa.”

Lydia’s face heated. “I know.”

“I tried to correct her, but Willem said it was fine. That every girl needed a papa.”

Lydia flushed with embarrassment. Could it be that she’d given more than herself to Willem? That he believed his claim went so far as to reach her children as well? Yet, if he believed that, why would he not come to her and truly claim her as his own? Why had he not kissed her in Chicago? The only explanation was that he didn’t want her, not really. He enjoyed being around her and her children. Were they the reason he stayed, or the reason he never came too close?

How devoted was he to her children. Would he marry her for the love of them, if not for the love of her? Would his family allow such a match? Would he begin to love her eventually? The desire was there, of that she was certain. But she thought back to Luc. Desire wasn’t love.

Lydia gave Milo a squeeze. “Will you dance with me tonight? There will be loads of pretty girls, but you may never forget your own mama.”

“Willem says I have the prettiest mama in all of Montana.”

Lydia gave him a sad smile. Prettiest in Montana, but not in Chicago. That was the pool from which he would be fishing when his time came.



Chapter 16



Lydia sent Milo to check that Bridget was settled in the house with Mrs. Morris. The woman had offered to care for the little ones so Della and Lydia could both attend the dance.

Once Milo had scurried from her room, she changed into one of her new dresses. Not the formal ones Ivete had given her, but the red dress Della's bird-like seamstress said brought out the warmth in Lydia's eyes. She smiled, enjoying the thought of having Ivete around again.

Thomas had purchased several acres of land bordering Bastien's property. While Ivete was in Chicago, obeying her father's wish that she take time to decide if Thomas really was for her, Thomas had put all his frustrated energy with the Graham patriarch into building a large home for him and Ivete to live. It was basic but large. And finished. Ivete would be happy there, though Lydia expected Ivete would be in Della's kitchen every day, working together to provide meals for both households. Lydia felt a pang of jealousy over the lives the two women would live, so close in proximity and spirit.

Simon had a few brothers, all of whom were also married. If she left Aster Ridge and went to Roberta, would she form similar relationships with her sisters-in-law? Lydia's shoulders drooped. She hadn't bonded with the women before. Would she really bond with them now? And, of course, Roberta would expect Lydia to marry. She wouldn't accept Lydia's children living on their charity for longer than necessary. Lydia didn't disagree with that. She shouldn't even be staying here, with the impression that she needed the Grahams' help, not when she could move home and marry again.

An image of Mitch O'Connell flashed into her mind. He was attractive enough, and his family well off. He was set to inherit the ranch when his father died. Marriage to him would be safe, predictable. With two young children to care for, that should be exactly the type of marriage she sought. Lydia bit the inside of her cheek. How far would she go for the comfort of her children? A difficult question to answer when they lived in such comfort now. Della was the only aunt they knew. Would it be wrong to take them from her, from Bastien and Willem? Ivete and Thomas? These people were the only family her children had ever known. She would have to make her decision soon, before any more attachments were made.

Lydia straightened her spine and made for the dance floor. The fiddles hadn't yet started, and guests mingled and ate.

Eloise rushed to Lydia and took her hands. "There's a man here I want you to meet."

Lydia drew a slow breath. "Eloise, I'm not up to being courted tonight. You get out there with the men. I'll just stay on this side of the tables and help wherever I can."

Eloise lowered her brows, scrutinizing Lydia, but the fiddles gave a sharp chord. The music pulled Eloise away from Lydia and into a young man's arms. Many of the guests already had beaux who twirled them on the first dance. Her gaze swept the area, landing on Willem. He stood across the dance floor, glaring at her. She closed her eyes and drew a deep breath, hoping when she opened them again he would have remembered his manners. Perhaps he would stop glaring and apologize for accusing her of adultery.

Charles Wilkinson's voice interrupted her wishes. "Ms. Lydia. I should have known you'd be hiding among the chores. I believe the guests can serve themselves. Will you allow me the next dance?"

Lydia forced a smile. "Yes, Mr. Wilkinson. It would be my pleasure."

He stayed by her side and crossed his arms, waiting for another song to begin. "We did a fine job on the floor." He lifted his hands and showed Lydia his palms. "I'm earning myself a few calluses, but I'll lose them the minute I return to the city."

Lydia smiled at his soft hands. "Will you mourn them?"

Charles let out a loud laugh. "I'll mourn leaving here, but not for the calluses." His gaze swept over Lydia, and she shuffled under its weight. He looked out at the crowd. "Will you be returning to Chicago soon?"

Lydia slowly shook her head. With Luc's offer, she could never go back to that city. "I don't suppose I have reason at all to return. I'd never been before. I was only there for Ivete's wedding." The only other reason would be if she were to accept Maxine's offer to find her a husband. She chewed her lip. She did not want for solutions to her problems. The issue was that none of them were the answer she desired. It was like when she learned to tread water. She was never a strong swimmer, but she could keep herself from going under, only she could never seem to make herself go very far in either direction. She forced herself to not look at Willem, though she was certain she could feel the heat of his gaze still on her. Charles was not married. How could Willem possibly disparage her for talking to him?

The song ended and another began. Charles offered his hand with a bow of his head. Like many of the men she'd danced with in Chicago, Charles was an experienced partner. He spun and caught her

with strong arms. Though the dance was fast, neither partner stumbled, and when the song ended, they panted for air.

Lydia huffed. "That was fun." It truly had been. Dancing lifted her spirits like nothing else. It transported her to younger years and lighter days. Days when she didn't feel the weight of responsibility. When she was adored by the man she wanted, and none were too good for her.

Eloise approached, and introduced a gentleman. Lydia accepted his offer to dance and they twirled off again. In turn, Charles danced with Eloise.

The night wore on and Lydia never lacked for a dance partner. She kept a sharp eye on Luc, but he didn't approach her. She hoped her words that afternoon had warned him off. Her cheeks heated at the memory, at his assumption about her morals. Men like Luc were used to getting what they wanted. What of Willem? Did he get what he wanted? Is that why he demanded answers from her? Did he already have what he wanted from her? Lydia recalled Luc's words in the bunk house. *He only wants your toil. Your labor.*

A glance at the empty dishes on the tables told her she should bring out a few new foods from the house. She slid away from the crowd and walked across the dark grasses toward the house.

"Lydia?" Charles's voice floated to her on the night air. "You should not be alone."

She started at his voice then smiled when he stepped out of the shadows. "Charles, I'm no fair maiden who might be gobbled up by a wolf."

"I disagree." He stepped closer and drew his arm around her waist. His breath was hot in her ear. "I would like nothing more than to gobble you up." He tugged her toward the stable, but Lydia twisted free.

"Charles." She mustered all the authority she possessed. "You may help me bring a few dishes to the dance, but I'll not accept your suggestion." Her eyes flicked to the stable. Could he possibly be suggesting a tumble in a beast's stall?

He took a step toward her. Lydia's heart hammered in her chest. She wanted to see if anyone was near, but she didn't dare take her eyes from Charles. He was every bit the big bad wolf from her children's stories, watching her movements. Predicting her weakness.

His words were slow and deep. "You've been a gracious hostess, and I'll be leaving soon. Won't you allow me a bit of warmth before I return?"

"Willem is your host." Her words fell on deaf ears. The man did not care. He did not want Willem.

He reached for her.

She spun, but his hands, so strong and sure when they had danced, were now swift and dangerous. He grabbed her and pulled her back against his front. He pressed kisses along her neck, the scent of whiskey came from his breath.

She pushed his hands away from her waist. "Charles, stop it! Remove your hands."

"Lydia?" A small voice came from the darkness.

"Help!" Lydia cried.

Charles released her.

Eloise rushed closer and Lydia ran to her friend, throwing her arms around her. She drew a shuddering breath while Eloise petted her hair.

When she looked up, Charles had gone.

"Are you hurt?" Eloise asked, her voice soft.

Lydia shook her head. "You came just in time."

"I saw the pies were almost gone and went to get more from the house."

Lydia laughed, a note of hysteria in her throat. "That was my intention too, but Charles found me before I made it."

Eloise kept an arm around Lydia as they made their way to the house. Instead of gathering the dishes, Eloise pressed Lydia into a chair and set a slice of pie in front of her. "Eat a bit, you're shaking."

Lydia gave a wobbly laugh. "I don't know why. Nothing happened, and I'm no innocent."

"Doesn't matter. That man can't take whatever he wants."

Lydia's gaze warmed as Eloise loaded up her arms with more pie plates than should be possible with only two hands. "You take your time. This is the last of the food, so there will be nothing to refill. And be sure to lock your door tonight."

Lydia nodded and Eloise left. In the quiet she could hear Mrs. Morris singing to the little girls in the bedroom. Bridget would be sleeping in the big house tonight. Willem had taken to sleeping in the bunkhouse with his guests. Eloise's words rang in her head. She did not want to sleep in the guest house tonight. Milo might wish to protect his mother, but Charles made her quiver with fear.

When she'd finished her slice of pie, she tidied up the kitchen. There wasn't much to clean since most of the dirty dishes were still out. Lydia glanced out the window into the dark night. She didn't dare gather them for washing.

A shuffle of feet sounded in the hallway and Mrs. Morris appeared, smiling. "Well, hello. Why aren't you out with the young people enjoying the dance? Those fiddles are mighty nice." She bobbed her head toward the open window and the music that streamed in.

"They're wonderful. Only, I'm tired. Will you let Della know I'll be

sleeping here in the big house? I'll pull Bridget in bed with me."

Mrs. Morris lowered a brow. "You're sure you don't want to finish the dance? I know my boys were looking forward to a dance with you."

Lydia laughed. "I danced with Lachlan. You've raised a fine bunch."

Mrs. Morris smiled at the compliment and nodded. "If you're sure, I'll head out and see who else my children have their hearts set on."

Lydia was left to the quiet house. The space didn't feel safe, not with Charles lurking. She should have asked Mrs. Morris to stay. The windows that lined the outside of the house were black, and Lydia imagined Charles walking by, seeing her alone.

She collected a lantern from the kitchen and walked down the hall to pull a sleeping Bridget into her arms. She carried the small child across the hall and into the room where Willem usually slept. She chuckled at how Della had claimed this house was too big. Every bed had been filled since before she'd birthed Violet.

Willem's room had only one large bed. She tucked Bridget in, then herself. The moment she lay her head on the pillow she was engulfed in Willem's scent. Until now, she hadn't even realized he possessed such a distinct smell. Cold air and freshly cut lumber. So different from the cigar smoke scent he carried in Chicago. With the smell of him, came the image of him glaring at her over the broomstick. She burrowed deeper under the quilt and listened to Bridget's steady breathing.

She wanted to be angry with Willem. She was angry with him. But she also longed for his forgiveness. She'd looked forward to this dance as something that would bring them together again. Willem was a fine dancer, and they'd enjoyed one another at the banquet for Ivete's wedding. Though less than a month had passed, those days felt like an eternity ago. An eternity and a dream. She'd been foolish to interpret his attention as anything but that of a good host. They'd been around one another for nearly a year prior to the wedding, and he hadn't made any romantic advances. Why had her mind turned to romance when she'd seen his change of attitude in Chicago? Just because she was thinking of marriage didn't mean all the single men around her thought of it, too. And Willem didn't think of anything except his ranch.



Chapter 17



Willem woke to the sound of the latch as Lydia brought in the breakfast tray. He closed his eyes, feigning sleep. She'd left the dance early and only Luc's presence on the floor had kept him with the guests instead of tracking her down. Had she always been this elusive and he'd just now noticed? From behind his closed eyelids he could hear the click of plates on the table and the deeper sound of a weighted food-filled platter. The other men slept through the soft noises of her labor. Under different circumstances having his guests worn out from a night of dancing might have brought a smile to his lips. But he had no wish, or need, to smile just now. He wanted to feel every drop of bitterness that had filled him ever since Luc first met Lydia in their parent's gilded halls. To let that bitterness show on his face. There was nobody to please just now.

Once she left, he climbed out of bed and met Charles' eyes. So he'd woken too, did he feign sleep as well? What need had he to avoid Lydia? Just yesterday he'd been complaining of her attentions with Luc. Or were his words merely informative? Did Willem merely project his own disdain on the situation? Maybe what Charles had seen pass between Luc and Lydia had caused Charles to give up his pursuit. Willem pulled on his pants, hooking the suspenders over his shoulders before sliding into his vest. He could use a hard ride this morning. The horse he'd thought would be such a dear addition to the ranch had hardly been ridden. The pressing need to finish the bunkhouse eclipsed equine entertainment.

Maybe Lydia's words had been truer than he'd like to admit. Maybe he had been too busy since his return. But too busy for what? Did she *want* his attention?

He pulled his shoe strings, tightening the knot on his shoe.

The door opened once again. Lydia nudged it with her toe, her arms full with another tray. He cursed his slow wit. He should be watching for her in order to assist by opening the door. Willem glared at the table, wondering what else was missing from their meal that she'd had to make another trip across the grass.

"Good morning," Willem grumbled. Her words from yesterday still chafed. She'd mocked him for trying to prove himself. Told him Luc was better for being without airs. He clenched his fist at the thought. Luc had no need to put on airs. He set the bar. No one expected him to

rise to it.

“Morning.” Her voice sounded chilly, and Willem looked away again.

A sniff came from the bunks, and Lydia glanced at Charles with a touch of apprehension. Or was it fear? Probably embarrassment that her cold words had an audience.

She lifted the tray from the tabletop. “I’ll be back to gather the dishes for washing.”

As the door closed behind her, Willem swallowed the lump of guilt that had formed in his throat. He usually brought the dirty dishes back, saving Lydia the trip. She must think their argument negated his chivalry. And why not when he’d ignored her arrival and left her to open the door with her hands full.

Charles shuffled over, filling a tin cup from the fresh pitcher. “Those townsfolk brought spirits that could burn a man from the inside out.” He closed his eyes as though fighting a headache.

“Imbined a bit too much, eh?” Willem hadn’t drank last night, though he’d been tempted. The last thing he needed was to lose his faculties. As it were, he’d hardly kept himself from storming over to Lydia and demanding she finish their conversation. Instead, he’d decided to use the chance to network with the folks of Dragonfly Creek and see if a twirl with a few of their maids could pull his mind away from Lydia. Nothing worked. With every smile, he thought of what Lydia had said about him trying to prove himself. She’d seen him in Chicago. No wonder she thought him unsure of himself. Would she still think it if Luc weren’t here? Willem would admit when he was around his father or Luc he felt the need to impress. He could never shake the memory of his last time at the club Luc so often frequented. The image of his father, paying down his gambling debts and hauling him from the establishment. On the other side, Luc somehow managed to indulge without drawing their father’s disdain. No matter how he drank and gambled, he always had full control. He always left the gambling table with more than when he sat down.

Funny. Willem hadn’t even been able to enjoy the dance last night. Though it was exactly his sort of gathering. Honest fun and revelry. All there because of his vision. Even now all he wanted to do was to chase down Lydia, to know how far she’d allowed Luc’s affection, to demand she listen to him as he explained the bet.

The smell of hot food from Lydia’s first delivery drew the men from their warm beds. Willem began to sweat at the prospect of their last meal at Aster Ridge. The coach would arrive before noon to take them to Billings, then on to Chicago where they would speak of this past week with good or ill reviews.

He sat at the table, the men in various stages of dress. “Well, boys.

There's a serious discussion to be had. Do you mind talking while you eat?"

Charles leaned back in his seat, brushing crumbs from his hands. "What have you?"

"I appreciate you coming out for a visit while I'm still in the testing phase. I need your opinion on this ranch of mine. What did you enjoy? What can be improved?"

"Women." Charles chuckled as though this opinion was obvious.

Bennon wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "How can you say that when you're the only one of us who had any success? I saw you follow Lydia back to the house last night."

Willem's heart beat hard and fast in his ears.

Slim shifted in his seat. "Did you really? I thought she'd hold her ground when it came to you. Surely she knew you'd be gone by morning."

Another man spoke. "Maybe the ladies aren't interested in having him but once."

The table laughed, and Willem moved his hands to his lap where he could clench them together and keep from throttling Charles. He shouldn't have wasted his time watching Luc. Charles was the man who could offer Lydia everything she needed.

Charles raised his hands, quieting the laughter at his expense. "I'd like her more than once. I'd bring that girl home. My mother is always after me to settle down, but I can't stand the prim ones. Luc's Angelica is fair, but I want a girl like Lydia, one who has a bit of fire in her. I could get used to being burned."

Slim chuckled and turned his attention to Willem. "To answer your question, I thought this was a mighty fine time. I know you hope to get a few foals born during visits, and I think that would be an excellent addition. Maybe a bit of hunting in the fall. Trapping in the winter. You might prepare the pelts of whatever is caught and send them to us in Chicago when they are tanned and ready."

Willem thought through the logistics of Slim's suggestions. He might hire the Morris boys or someone in town to help trap and prepare the skins. The thinking tempered his anger at Charles, but he still could not look at the man.

Willem gave Slim a grateful nod. "You're an entrepreneur like your father, it's no wonder you Macintoshes are moving right up in the city. If he gives the business over to you, soon you'll have the largest house in Chicago."

The men continued to offer advice around him, but Willem barely heard. His mind whirled on one thing— his next conversation with Lydia. He kept his face passive, a calm mask to hide the tumult in his chest.

He knew Charles's brag had the same odds of being true as false, but that didn't stop him rushing to clear away the dishes. He itched to seek her out. No more waiting. He ignored the tray of leftover scraps and dirty dishes and bounded out the door.

In the house Bastien sat at the table with Violet on his knee. He smiled at Willem. "Last night was a success." Bastien passed him a biscuit.

He twitched his cheeks in the slightest of smiles. "It was. I'm afraid I've asked much from your wife and your house. If this keeps on, I may need to build a real house, or at least a kitchen."

"Let's keep it as it is for now. Della doesn't mind sharing the kitchen. You've decided to keep Lydia then?"

Willem's insides twisted at Bastien's words. He wished he could keep her, but not as hired help. How long would it be before his venture was ready to support a family? Would she even want him after their argument last night? Heaven knows she is capable of catching a man much better than he.



THE BREAKFAST DISHES were almost done. Lydia needed to get the plates and platters from the bunkhouse, but she dreaded an encounter with Charles.

As though reading her thoughts Eloise asked, "Did you speak with Willem about what happened last night?"

Lydia stepped nearer to Eloise, stifling a glare. "No, and please do be quiet! I don't want anyone to know." She darted her eyes around the room to be sure there was no one to overhear.

Eloise planted her fists on her hips. "Lydia, you have nothing to be ashamed of."

Lydia thought of Luc's offer. She'd allowed Luc to pay her attention. A man like him should be ignored and given the widest berth. But she was like a doe come down the mountain with the spring thaw. The heat of the sun made her thirsty, and she was willing to drink from a pool of tepid water just to feel the wetness on her tongue. To have a man's attention again ... she was ashamed to have allowed such a thing at all, let alone from a married man.

"Nothing happened and I should have been more careful." If Willem noticed her relationship with Luc, so did everyone else on this ranch. Would they believe her if she told them Charles advances had been unwanted?

Eloise scrubbed at a spot on the counter. "Something almost happened. Bastien will not want men like that on his ranch, around his family. You should tell them."

"I'll not tell them, and neither will you." Lydia tried to keep her

voice light, but she couldn't meet Eloise's eyes.

As though proving her point, she straightened her spine and marched out to the bunkhouse. If nothing happened, then why was she wary of doing her job? The sun was out, chasing away the demons that waited in the dark.

She'd not gone more than a few steps when she heard the sound of footsteps behind her. She turned.

Eloise smiled. "I'm not leavin' you to those men alone." She jerked her chin toward the bunkhouse, her eyebrows raised meaningfully. Then she gestured to the main house. "Willem is still in there with Bastien."

Warmth spread through Lydia's chest and she linked her arms through Eloise's. As they walked to the bunkhouse Lydia imagined Eloise marrying Mitch O'Connell. Maybe Lydia could set herself up with a community of women in Wyoming. She might not have real sisters, but she could replicate one idea of Angelica's and handpick a few women to stay close to her.



Chapter 18



Lydia's back no longer ached after completing her chores. She'd finally gained back the muscle she lost those short few weeks in Chicago. Good. Now to shed the rest of the airs she'd unintentionally gained in that too-large house.

With the chores complete, Lydia returned to her guest house. Tomorrow was the sabbath, and she wanted to give the space a good scouring before next week. Bridget busied herself around the place while Lydia swept and scrubbed. The floors of her residence didn't collect nearly the dust that the bunkhouse did, nor even Della's home. The guest house was comfortable, but it did not feel like a home. It was used mostly for sleeping and wasn't a spot where anyone gathered.

A soft knock sounded on her door. She rose and opened it to find Bastien standing next to Simon's parents. Roberta and Carl Skinner. She stumbled back a step, the breath leaving her lungs. She motioned with her hand for them to enter. Bastien allowed the Skinners to enter, tipped his hat in farewell to Lydia and closed the door.

"Roberta. Carl. I'm so glad to see you. What are you doing here?"

Roberta scoffed. "I told you we'd be by to pick you up after the spring planting."

Lydia tried to remember Roberta's letter, but she couldn't see past the fog in her mind. She should have sent her reply, but she'd been waiting to see if she could figure another solution, see if the job with Willem panned out. She thought of their fight in the bunkhouse and his glare at the dance. The job was most definitely not working out.

She glanced at Roberta. The woman's gaze roved over the guest house with clear disdain. Heat and loathing crept up to Lydia's ears. The thought of Milo and Bridget living with her made Lydia's lip curl.

Bridget came toddling around the corner, no doubt interested in the noise. Roberta gasped and went to Bridget. She plucked the girl from the ground and set her on her hip. "Well, aren't you a little beauty?"

Bridget twisted away, and Roberta set the child down, a flash of disappointment flitting across her face.

Lydia accepted Bridget's nervous embrace. "She'll warm up to you."

Roberta looked around the space. "Lovely house they have here.

I'm sure they'll be glad to have it back." Roberta ran her gaze down Lydia's frame, instantly transporting her back to her teenage years and the shame that came along with a pregnancy out of wedlock. Add to it, the idea of their beloved youngest son, marrying trash. A flush made its way up Lydia's neck, and she lifted her chin.

"Bastien and Della are our dear friends from Kirwin. They've been very gracious to host us while we recovered from the loss of Simon."

Carl cleared his throat. "Where is Milo? He must be almost as tall as you by now."

"He's likely out at the stables. He loves to help with the work."

Roberta pursed her lips. "I hope he's not working too hard. A young boy needs to focus on his learning. Otherwise, he'll work all his life."

"He does well in his studies." Lydia matched Roberta's unwavering gaze.

Roberta pursed her lips. "The people in town said he doesn't attend the school."

Her stomach lurched. Roberta had asked the townsfolk about her son. "I teach him here."

"Along with all your other duties?" Roberta gave Carl a smile that spoke of a shared secret. "There is a young man back home whom we have hired as a tutor. Milo will be able to catch up to his peers."

The urge to press these people from her room jumped on Lydia like a rush of cool water from the well. She wanted nothing more than to reject their offer of schooling and hospitality. Yet, something in her—be it manners or motherhood—made her stop. Her children would benefit from living around family. The Grahams had already done much more than should be required of friends. It was time Lydia passed the burden of her family to others.

Soon enough, she could marry and be a burden to her husband. Mitch O'Connell flashed into her mind once more. Not him, but maybe someone like him with a steady temper and a stable living. He really wasn't a bad catch, though Mitch's mother might mirror Roberta's opinion when it came to her displeasure at having Lydia for a daughter.

Roberta sniffed. "Can you be ready to leave after services tomorrow? We really do need to get back."

Lydia drew a breath. Terrified at the thought of leaving, but anxious to get away from Luc and Charles. And Willem too if she was completely honest. Though he'd been ornery yesterday when he held her gaze from across the broomstick, though she'd been hurt and embarrassed by a bet used for the Graham men's entertainment, she'd still wanted him to kiss her. She'd wanted him to demand she refuse Luc. To tell her he wanted her for himself. But he would never do that

and the sooner she accepted it, the better.

"I can be ready this afternoon." The words twisted in her gut, but she couldn't help feel smug at Roberta's shocked face. The woman loved to be in charge, to bully others into her plans. She was not often taken off guard. Lydia suppressed a smile. It was no wonder she didn't like Lydia. Something in Lydia wouldn't be cowed by this woman. "Would you mind staying with Bridget? I'll just go speak with Della about my plans."

Roberta nodded, and Lydia left the house. When she entered the prairie, she drew a deep breath. The spring flowers hadn't yet been burned off by the summer sun and their scent begged her to stay. I'll be able to visit my children every night. It's only temporary. But as she walked, her feet refused to be comforted, and she caught her toe on the earth. She fell to the ground. The hard hit of her body against the ground jarred an image of Milo crying out in his sleep into her mind. She wouldn't be there to help his nightmares. Neither would Willem. Her throat was thick as she stood and shook the dirt from her skirts. She didn't have a choice. Milo would eventually have to overcome these nightmares. Maybe living in a home with a father figure once again would do the trick. If Willem could calm Milo's fears, certainly Carl could do the same. She took a bolstering breath and entered the house.

Della sat at the dining table folding linens. "Bastien said the Skinners are here." Della's mouth twitched, and her eyes were sad. "I suppose we knew you'd leave eventually. I just didn't expect it so soon."

Lydia wanted to rush to Della and pull her friend into her arms. She pinned her hands at her sides, afraid if she went to her friend now, she might beg Della to let her family stay forever. "I'll write often." Her throat tightened, and she couldn't say more.

Della dropped her hands and widened her eyes to plead with Lydia. "Just promise me you'll ask for anything you need. You can come for a visit any time. Or just come back altogether."

Eloise entered the room, drawing both women's gazes. "Who's wagon is out front?" The girl stopped and took in both women's expressions. "What's wrong?" Eloise looked to Lydia. "Did you tell her?"

Lydia's breath hitched.

Della cocked her head to the side. "Tell me what?"

Eloise's eyes flashed between Lydia and Della. She bit her lip and let her gaze fall to the floor.

"Lydia." Della's voice held a warning.

Lydia spoke to her toes. "It's nothing. Charles just hoped for more attention than I was willing to give."

Della knit her eyebrows, and Eloise searched Lydia's face. Surely the girl was afraid to misspeak again, but the damage had already been done.

"What are we talking about?" Ivete's form filled the doorway. Her smile faltered as she took in the other three women.

Lydia itched to run back to her borrowed guest house, despite the thorn of a woman inside.

Ivete touched Lydia's arm. "Bastien said you're heading to Wyoming." Ivete's searched Lydia's face, her large eyes sad. "When did you decide this?"

Lydia sat in a dining chair with a huff. Three women against her, and she was already displeased with the situation. "Simon's mother wrote to me just before we left for your wedding. I didn't want to tell you, and when you returned yesterday there was so much going on with the dance ..."

"Are you leaving *today*?" Ivete's voice was incredulous. Broken.

Lydia nodded, tears rimming her eyes.

"Oh!" Ivete threw her arms around Lydia's neck. "I had hoped we might keep you here a while. Find you a handsome man when the time came."

Della touched Lydia's arm. "Have you packed already? But ... what was Eloise saying about Charles? Has he been courting you? What does *he* think about you leaving with the Skinners?"

"No. There's nothing between myself and Charles." The words exploded from Lydia's lips, angry from being held back too long.

Ivete's eyes sparkled. She leaned forward. "Charles Wilkinson? Oh, I'd love it if you married him."

Eloise stepped closer. "Charles was trying to have his way with her. Who knows what might have happened if I hadn't come upon them."

Della glared at Lydia. "He accosted you? What happened?"

Lydia glanced at Eloise with a measure of annoyance. "Nothing happened. He took me by the waist and hoped for more. He wasn't accepting my refusal, and that's when Eloise came. Nothing happened."

Lydia felt like a child's toy repeating the same words with every pull of the string.

Della's eyes darkened. "Willem cannot bring just any man here. I'll not have that. Eloise, what if you hadn't found them? What if it had been you?" Della shook her head. "I'll not have it. Bastien won't either." Della glanced toward the front door as though she wanted at that very moment to seek out her husband and right the injustice.

Lydia put up her hands. "Please, everyone just settle down. Nothing happened. I would have been able to make my point clear. I

hadn't yet had to try my hardest. It was nothing." But Lydia was lying. She remembered how she'd shook when Eloise brought her into the house, how she feared her own bed after that night. One more reason to leave right away for Wyoming.

She stood. "I must pack."

Della touched her arm. "Are you certain?" Della knew all about the strain between Roberta and Lydia. She knew Lydia's fears that it would be difficult to live near that woman, to have her children in Roberta's house.

"It's best for the children and only temporary. They'll have cousins and aunts and uncles."

Ivete scoffed. "We'll give you cousins right here. We'll be their aunts and uncles."

Lydia smiled at Ivete's naive ways. Ivete was pampered, used to being cherished and loved, of having her every need provided. She was like Willem in that she gave little thought to the mechanics of a thing, only that it brought comfort. "We'll visit. And when they're older, convince Milo and Violet to marry."

Della gave a sad laugh. "Come, I'll help you pack. I want to meet this snake and see if her rattle scares me."



WILLEM AND HIS GUESTS rode over to join Thomas at his house. They worked to unload the lumber from the wagon, passing the raw wood along their gloved hands into a pile on the porch. Milo came running and stopped in front of Willem. Out of breath and doubled over, the child's face twisted in concern.

Willem took his skinny shoulders. "What's wrong? Has something happened?"

"Grandma and Grandpa." Breath. Breath. "They're taking Mama and us away."

Willem led the boy to a seat in the shade of the house. He walked to the pump and pressed a cup of cold water into Milo's hands. The child took a small sip then set it aside. "Mama told me I could come say goodbye. We're leaving for Wyoming."

Wyoming? Willem remembered the letter he'd posted in Chicago. From Lydia to Roberta. He'd forgotten about the possibility of Lydia leaving. His stomach sank to the ground. "Did your mother ask for me to come speak with her?"

Milo shook his head. "She said I had to hustle so we didn't keep my grandparents waiting."

Willem clenched his jaw. In confronting Lydia about Luc, he'd driven her away, as far as possible.

Thomas came closer and tousled Milo's hair. "Does Ivete know?"

Milo nodded. "She helped Mama pack."

Willem offered Milo his hand. "I'll walk you back. I'd like to say goodbye to your mother myself."

As he walked hand in hand with Milo, Willem's heart weighed heavy. He should have realized his feelings sooner— months ago. He should have told her that as soon as she was ready, he wanted to court her. He'd been a fool to wait for Luc to sound the race cannon. A fool to spend so much time building the ranch when he should have been making her fall in love with him.

She was right. He'd spent his time and energy impressing the wrong people. No wonder she chose Wyoming. He'd known she wouldn't stay here forever, that she'd been itching to remove the burden of her family from Bastien's hands. Now it was too late.

Or was it?

Willem and Milo jogged the last half mile, and by the time he reached the wagon, his lungs were filled with fresh air and opportunity. Lydia leaned against the wagon, Bridget on her hip.

She turned when Milo approached, but her smile fell when she spotted Willem.

He stopped short, swallowing the lump in his throat. "You're leaving?"

She nodded. "Wyoming. I didn't realize it would be so soon." She adjusted Bridget and glanced towards the house. "Eloise said she'll help with whatever you need for the ranch. Her parents could use anything extra she can earn."

Eloise wouldn't do to serve the gentlemen who came. Hungry for more than food. Truly, Lydia couldn't even handle them.

"Do you have to go?" Willem was aware of the stern-faced woman standing a few feet away, listening to every word they spoke.

"I could wait, but they came to collect us, and I'd not want them to have wasted the trip." She sucked in a slow breath. "I was always going."

Was she? Something about the last week told him otherwise, told him she'd finally found a reason to stay. Had their fight yesterday ruined everything?

Bastien and an older man hauled a trunk into the wagon and shut the gate with a thud.

The man spoke to the group. "Ready to go?"

Lydia offered Willem a weak smile. "Thank you for the work. I hope you find someone soon."

She turned and set Bridget in the wagon, then climbed up herself. He wanted to pluck her from the wheel and set her down again. He wanted to lead her back to the bunkhouse and finish their heated conversation. Had that passion been one-sided? It must have been,

otherwise she would not be going now.

Della came over and leaned into Willem's shoulder. He put an arm around his sister-in-law, glad for someone else's pain to help him ignore his own. "You're going to miss her," he said, giving her a squeeze.

Della's head shifted against his arm as she nodded.

Ivete came to his other side, her face like she'd just eaten something sour. "Willem, why did you not marry her? Now she's going away. Surely you could have given up this ranch idea and gone to work for Father, gotten your inheritance. Then she wouldn't be leaving us."

A sadness overtook Willem. He hadn't even thought of that idea. Maybe he didn't love her after all. Didn't someone in love do whatever it took to be with the person they loved? Yet he was standing here, watching as the older man snapped the reins and took her away. Maybe his family was right and he was still too immature. He didn't know what love was.



Chapter 19



Tears pooled in Lydia's eyes, but the wind whipped them away before they could fall down her cheeks. She held her babies close. Milo was understandably subdued, but Bridget's still behavior made Lydia think she too must have some understanding of what this wagon ride meant. Her gut twisted as they followed the familiar road out of the Aster Ridge Ranch. They passed the Morris' farm and were almost to town when she could no longer deny the churning in her stomach. She leaned over the side of the wagon and heaved out every bit of food she'd had for lunch.

Carl stopped the horses and waited for her to be done. Lydia wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. "Sorry," she mumbled, torn between pain and embarrassment.

"Do you want to rest a while?" Carl asked, his face pinched with concern or disgust. She couldn't tell.

Lydia shook her head. "I'll be fine." Already, her stomach felt better. And her spirit perked up a bit to know the ache within wasn't to do with leaving the Graham's behind.

They'd barely started again when Roberta hooked her elbow over the back of the seat and looked at Lydia through narrowed eyes. "You're not pregnant, are you?" Her lip curled as she said the word.

"No." Lydia's voice was weak from the effort of being sick. She closed her eyes, relishing the breeze that cooled the sweat dotting her forehead.

A whispered exchange took place between the Skinners, and Lydia caught Roberta's words. "It's not like she needed marriage the last time. And you didn't see the way that man said goodbye."

"I'm not pregnant," Lydia ground out.

"I believe you. It was only a question." Roberta shifted in her seat, her wide bottom taking up more than her half of the bench seat. After some time, Roberta hooked her arm over the seat once more. "Simon said you struggled with Bridget after the birth."

Lydia remembered those sleepless nights and the sadness and anger that took turns driving into her. She nodded, not meeting Roberta's eyes.

"Probably better you don't have any more children. Not all women are suited to motherhood."

Milo leaned forward, glaring at his grandmother. "My ma is a good

one. Aunt Della says she's still plenty young enough for more children."

Lydia's gaze shot to her son. His speech spoke of an overheard conversation that wasn't meant for a child's ears. What else had he heard Della say?

Roberta gave Milo a false smile. "Of course, she is. But that woman isn't your aunt. You'll be meeting plenty of *real* aunts soon enough."

Her words reminded Lydia why she did this. She was no fool for taking her children from the only family they'd ever known. They were young enough still to integrate into a new family. One that shared their blood. And after all, blood was what mattered. Right?



WILLEM COULDN'T BRING himself to return to Thomas's house. He didn't want to smile and laugh with the guests. He could not summon his usual love for social stimulation. He wanted only to lie in his bed. He made his way inside Bastien's house to his old room. It still housed his things, and he would be sleeping there once again when the guests had gone home. He fell into the bed, immediately engulfed in thoughts of Lydia. His mind was creative in its imagery, so creative he could almost smell her on his pillow. He opened his eyes, hoping the furniture in the room might offer a respite from his thoughts.

"Willem!" Luc's voice boomed from somewhere in the house. At the sound of his brother's voice, Willem's heart picked up pace.

He sat up and kicked his legs to the floor, listening for another call. He hated how, even as an adult, his instinct was to stand at attention for the man. Another reason to resent his elder brother.

"Willem?" came Luc's voice again. Closer this time. Willem wanted Luc to enter, wanted to throw him against the wall. Never had Willem been filled with such anger as he was now. Anger had been his constant friend these last several days. Even his aggression with Lydia in the bunkhouse was unlike him. Glaring in general was something he rarely did. Yet he was glaring now with nobody in the room with him.

Luc opened the door. "Willem, there you are ..."

"She's gone." Willem's voice cut the air, and he pressed his hands flat on the quilt beneath him.

"The coach is here." Luc's voice sounded questioning, almost wary.

"Neither of us got her. Are you happy?"

Luc glanced over his shoulder and closed the door. "She was never ours. I'm married and you know you need a rich woman. No business endeavor of yours will ever make you rich."

"I would have loved her."

"Would you?" The corner of Luc's mouth lifted in amusement.

“Can you love anyone besides yourself?”

Willem leapt from the bed and pressed his forearm against Luc’s throat, backing him up until Luc’s shoulders hit the wall. “It is you who cannot love another.”

Luc’s smile remained, unperturbed by Willem’s dominating position. “Glad to see you’ve earned yourself a bit of courage out in the west. Too bad you hadn’t found it before you let Lydia leave with those stiff folks. Do you think her husband was so stiff? She’d surely benefit from knowing a Graham, if you get my meaning—”

Willem pressed Luc’s throat, cutting off his crass insinuations.

Luc shoved Willem off him, ending any pretense Willem had of overpowering Luc. How, when Willem had worked hard every day, could Luc still best him in everything. Was there nothing that Willem could do better than Luc?

Luc stared at Willem as though readying for a blow that Willem hadn’t yet decided if he would cast. Luc gave Willem a sorry shake of his head and opened the bedroom door once more. “Your beloved guests are leaving.”

Luc left the room and Willem drew several deep breaths, waiting for the adrenaline to leave his blood before he bid farewell to his guests.

He’d barely started down the hall when Bastien approached him, anger in his eyes. “Your man, Charles. He accosted Lydia.”

Willem knit his brows, his mind spinning as though he’s been hit in the head. “What? When?”

“The night of the dance. He’ll not be allowed here again. And if anything like that ever happens again, you’ll have to find a place of your own to host these men. I don’t care that you built a bunkhouse. I’ll not have blackguards endangering my family or those who work for me.”

Willem pushed away the anger flowing through his veins. Bastien was innocent. He wouldn’t take his rage out on him. Willem let out a slow breath. “I’ll be sure Charles knows he’s not welcome.”

Willem walked away. After he banned Charles from the ranch, Charles would never recommend it to his friends. By protecting his family, he doomed his business. The very reason Willem had encouraged Luc to get Charles here was wasted. And Lydia had been hurt in the process. Willem was disgusted with himself. Luc’s words rang in his head. *Can you love anyone besides yourself?* He could, but had he shown that? Or had he shown that this ranch was what he loved, that succeeding in the eyes of his father was what he wanted most of all. He certainly hadn’t shown Lydia he wanted her most of all. He’d been angry with her, and in turn she’d not told him of Charles’s actions. He should have protected her. Instead, he’d left her

to her own devices. Bastien was right to ban him from pursuing her. Bastien was so much better suited to protecting a woman than Willem. Willem, always relying on others, following others, hoping for a glance or a smile of approval.

He caught up to his guests as the coachmen loaded the trunks onto the back of the vehicle. He plastered on his classic wide smile. The one that showed his big teeth and charmed men and women alike. He clapped Charles on the shoulder, "I need to speak with you."

The two men moved off to the side of the house, away from listening ears.

Charles reached across and patted Willem's shoulder with his large hand.

The hand that had touched Lydia. The hand she'd not wanted to touch her.

He knocked the hand off him, fisting Charles' collar. "I heard of your encounter with Lydia."

Charles used both hands to push away Willem's grip. "What encounter?"

He kept his voice level as he eked out the words. "You'll not be returning to Aster Ridge Ranch."

Charles laughed. "Surely you're joking. Luc told me why you were so keen to have me here this week."

"I was keen, but I'll not have any man who cannot control himself. Who must force his attention on a woman."

Willem hated him, hated the fact that he would surely use the ride to Billings to slander Willem's name and this whole endeavor. After today, Willem would be lucky to have a positive review from any of these men.

Charles glanced at the group. "I didn't force anything." But his voice wasn't as sure as before.

With a curt nod, Willem walked away from the steaming Charles Wilkinson and bid farewell to his more well-behaved guests. Urging them to return and to bring their friends.

Ivete spoke with Slim, promising that if he were to return she'd take him fishing and teach him all her tricks. Willem almost smiled at her easy way, how she blended easily between life in Chicago and here in Aster Ridge. He longed for her ability to disappoint their parents yet wear a smile and be truly content with her choices.

As he watched the coach pull away, a hollowness carved him out. He wouldn't be able to fill it anytime soon. It wasn't to do with his recently vacated bunkhouse, but who no longer filled the *guest* house. He already missed Milo's tugging hand and Bridget calling him papa. If he closed his eyes he could still picture Lydia hanging laundry on the line, or walking toward him from across the field, a coy smile on

her face.



Chapter 20



Relief flooded Lydia as they pulled to a stop in front of the hotel in the small town of Cotton Falls. The sun had nearly set, and darkness leaked across the wide sky. They'd left too late in the day to make it all the way to Billings before stopping. The hotel was the only one in town, and Roberta's face showed her displeasure at the grubby state of the place.

Lydia's body was weak, her hands shaking as she gathered her children and the carpetbag that held their overnight belongings. She stood to the side as Carl paid for their rooms, one for Lydia and the children and one for him and Roberta. Milo helped Bridget up the stairs.

Lydia collapsed onto the bed as soon as she was able. "Milo, I need you to care for Bridget. Can you get her nappy changed and lay her in bed with me?"

"Willem told me to take care of you." Milo's voice was too serious. Too mature. Had leaving made him lose a bit of his childhood? Was that loss something to mourn? She could imagine Simon's voice. *That's what we're here for. To raise a man, not a child.*

Without Simon here to speak those words, to help her cope with the change in her son, Milo's words made her want to weep. What a terrible day. Her heart was hollow, her belly empty. When Milo put Bridget on the bed and the little girl curled into her chest as if trying to fill the hollow space there, Lydia whimpered.



A QUIET TAPPING ON the door woke her up. She looked around the room. Bridget and Milo slept next to her. Stifling a groan, she crawled out of bed. What could the Skinners possibly want with her now?

She opened the door and rubbed sleep from her eyes. It couldn't be. But the rubbing didn't make the man before her disappear. "Luc?" She squinted at the man.

He stepped inside and closed the door with a silence that spoke of many secret trysts.

"Luc, I made myself clear—"

He pressed his fingers to her lips and glanced over her shoulder at her children in bed. "Your in-laws are scum," he whispered, meeting

her eyes.

Lydia drew her brows together and brushed his hand from her mouth.

He let his hand fall but held her gaze. "They were down in the dining room. They mean to separate you from Milo and Bridget."

Lydia swayed, her body weak from being sick. "Not separate. Not really. Milo and Bridget will stay with them until I find employment." Or a husband. "And I'll stay with my parents. I already know this, Luc. Now let me sleep."

"They came with a plan, and they were discussing Milo and how he might thwart their plan."

Thwart? He was making it sound like some sinister plot, making the Skinners out to be like villains in one of Ivete's novels.

She shook her head, anxious to settle the misunderstanding and return to her bed. "They are going to *care* for my children. I'll be allowed to visit them all I want." As she said the words, she knew how futile they sounded in light of whatever Luc may have heard. She took his wrist and drew him to the two chairs on either side of the unlit fireplace. "Tell me what you heard."

Luc leaned back, crossing his ankle over his knee as though he were merely having a drink and not delivering dangerous news. "I didn't hear everything. I had to pretend to be in my cups. Something about the governor in Wyoming. I think once you're there, you will be stuck in their web. Lydia, just take your children and go back to Aster Ridge. Bastien will offer you protection."

The Skinners were always so proud of their governor uncle. Would the man truly participate in some plot to steal Lydia's children? She thought of Roberta's comment that Lydia wasn't a fit mother. And how she hadn't appreciated Milo's defense of his mother.

She swallowed. "They couldn't proclaim me an unfit mother. Milo is old enough to speak against their claims."

Luc shook his head and looked imploringly at Lydia. "Don't risk it. Just go. Or come with me to Chicago."

Lydia leaned back, suddenly wary. Why would she trust a man such as Luc? For all she knew this could be a plot of his own making, one to convince her to accept his vile offer.

Luc scoffed and rolled his gaze to the ceiling. "I don't mean in that way. Mother will be glad to assist you." He gave an amused laugh. "She'd love the drama of fighting to keep your children. As long as it ended well. She'd never wish harm upon you. She would have loved a union between you and Willem."

Lydia's head spun with all the revelations coming at her. Like tree branches on a runaway horse, they hit her one after another before she could anticipate their arrival.

Perhaps he saw her waver because he planted his feet and scooted his chair forward, pressing his position. "I'll go for a coach tonight and take you to Chicago, or Aster Ridge. Wherever you think you'll be safe from them."

Safe from them? She still wasn't convinced they meant her family any harm. Was it a risk she could take? Her stomach protested at being out of bed, but she knew there was nothing left to purge.

"Surely this can wait until the morning." She pressed her fingers into her temple, knowing if her stomach didn't settle, tomorrow would be harder than this day. Even now, she doubted sleep would come after this worrisome news.

Luc's eyes filled with concern, lit by the blue hue of the full moon. "How powerful are your in-laws?" He gave a hard laugh. "They are not even your in-laws anymore. They are merely your children's grandparents." He shook his head.

"How far into your drinks were you when they began speaking of this plan?"

Luc stood, towering over her where she sat. "Lydia, do not question me. If you do not take this seriously, I will be forced to take matters into my own hands."

Lydia wanted to stand, to meet him at wits, but her body ached and her mind was tired from the day's events. "Do what you wish, just leave me to my bed."

He was right. Maxine did wish her well. If Luc decided to take Lydia and her family to Chicago, she could beg Maxine's hospitality. Snake as he was, Luc seemed less of a threat than Roberta and her cunning ways. Even looming over her in an effort to intimidate her into obedience, Luc's care for her shone through. She thought of how timid he'd been when he asked her to be his mistress.

None of the timidity showed now. His voice rose confidently. "You'll not leave until I come for you. Promise?"

Lydia nodded, her heart beating in her temples.

He left her to the silence of her room, and she crawled back into her spot next to her children. She was wrong about this news keeping her from sleep. Sleep came, though it was fitful enough with thoughts of what tomorrow would bring.



SHE WOKE TO ROBERTA'S squawky voice through her door. "Lydia, it is time to load. Are you well this morning?"

Lydia drew a deep breath and stretched, her children stirring beside her. Thank the heavens she felt much better than yesterday. As soon as she smiled at her health, that grin was stolen by a frown as she recalled Luc's visit in the night. Why had he not returned? Was he

downstairs now waiting for her?

"Come in," Lydia called as she crawled out of bed.

Roberta entered, eying Lydia's tousled appearance. A night of fitful rest hadn't done her long hair any favors. She tugged the fabric tie at the end of her braid and ran deft fingers through the locks.

"We want to get on our way soon. Please, do hurry." Roberta turned and left, not asking how Lydia was feeling nor offering assistance in readying the children.

Lydia shuddered to think of the Skinners caring for Milo and Bridget for the rest of their lives. Would a governor truly separate a mother from her children? A single mother ... possibly. Especially if a family with such status as the Skinners wanted the children. She ignored her shaking hands and hurried to ready herself and her children. She rubbed at the back of her neck, anxious to get downstairs. Did he wait for her? Or had he decided in the night to leave her to her fate.

When the children were dressed and their bags packed, they made their way downstairs. Her limbs felt weak from the sickness the day before. She needed a crust of bread if she was to do anything against whatever the Skinners demanded. Her eyes searched the dining area that also served as the entrance to the hotel. No Luc.

But Charles Wilkinson leered at her from the bottom of the stairs. "Ms. Lydia. I'm mighty glad to see you. Did you sleep well?"

Roberta balked at him from where she sat with a bowl of gruel. They hadn't met at Aster Ridge, and Lydia surmised she was shocked at his familiarity.

Lydia started down the stairs, her steps slow with apprehension. "Mr. Wilkinson. Are all of you men here?"

He pressed away from the wall as if he'd been expecting her. Was he helping Luc?

Charles lifted a brow as if the two of them were in cahoots. "The rest of the gentlemen are enjoying the excitement of the west. They'll be here presently."

Lydia's eyes flashed to Roberta, who watched their encounter with a critical eye. The woman didn't miss much, not where Lydia was concerned. Guilt and blame came as easily as bugs to a lantern in the night and were equally as pesky.

Lydia reached the bottom of the stairs and hefted Bridget onto her hip. "And Luc?"

"The strong knight has accepted his quest." Charles bowed his head and Lydia wanted to shake the riddles from his mouth. Instead, she led her children to Roberta's table and accepted bowls of breakfast from the hotel staff. Little Bridget ate slowly, and for that Lydia was grateful.

Finally, Roberta left the dining room.

Charles sat in her place. "First, I would beg your pardon for my actions at the dance. I had forgotten them altogether until Willem banned my return. I'd never thought of him as frightening before yesterday. He's usually so jolly."

Lydia's cheeks burned at the memory and of Willem having learned about it. It didn't matter now. She'd gone, and he'd let her. His actions, or lack of action, was telling enough about how he felt about her. He might beg her help on the ranch. He might love her children. He might even like her, but if after so many months he hadn't grown to love her, he never would.

Charles pressed his position. "Please, forgive me."

Lydia looked down her nose at him. "An apology does not always earn forgiveness. You might have truly hurt me."

"I was taken by surprise by those townsfolk and their rotgut whiskey. I swear I've never done that to another."

"That you remember," Lydia spat.

Charles's throat bobbed.

It didn't matter whether she forgave him or not. "Tell me, did Luc inform you of a plan?"

"He said those folks mean you harm and I'm to keep an eye on you in here."

"Where is he?"

"I believe he's out acquiring your luggage from that man."

Lydia craned her neck to see out of the grubby windows, but she could barely make out a moving form, let alone tell who it was. She turned to Milo, who'd been listening to the exchange with rapt attention.

Lydia put her hands on his shoulders and gave him a level stare. "Milo, dear. You are to stay here and watch your sister. Do you understand?"

He nodded firmly. He was a smart boy, and she didn't doubt he understood their predicament better than she realized.

Lydia drew a deep breath and turned to Charles. Apology or no, she wasn't leaving her children with this man. "C'mon." He joined her and they stepped out of the hotel. Luc loomed over a cowering Mr. Skinner, pointing to the wagon.

Mr. Skinner spluttered. "These things belonged to my son. I have as much claim on them as that woman. And those are my grandchildren. I'll not let them go off with some rogue." The town sheriff hovered nearby, listening to the argument. His arms crossed over his large belly. This was a small town, and the sheriff likely doubled as the barber. The man wasn't prepared to jump between two strangers fighting over a woman and a full wagon.

The sound of thundering hooves drew everyone's eyes. Willem's fine mount skidded to a halt beside Luc, and Willem slid off. His face was covered in dust and his mouth set in a frown. He lined his towering form next to Luc's. "Brother," he said, giving Luc a curt nod.

Carl took a step away from the two towering men. One was more than capable of defeating him, but two would bury him. Carl turned to the Sheriff. "Will you let these two men bully me from what is rightfully mine?"

Willem's eyes took in the situation, and when they fell on Lydia they were hard, unforgiving. What did he think of her? Why had he ridden all this way if he still harbored such hatred?

Lydia came down the stairs from the hotel porch. "Sheriff, those trunks are mine. They belong to me and my late husband. These gentlemen are here to help me return to my family in Dragonfly Creek."

She felt Willem's eyes on her, but she kept her shoulders back, trying to look the part of a widow with a mind of her own.

The sheriff took a step closer to the Graham brothers.

Roberta gasped. "These things may be hers, but we are taking the children. They are my grandchildren, and I'll not have you raising them to be a bunch of ruffians."

"Ma'am ..." the sheriff started.

Roberta cut him off. "My uncle is Governor Brooks, and a small man such as yourself would not want to get on the wrong side of *him*."

The sheriff puffed out his chest. His mustache hid his frown, but his eyes showed his displeasure all the same. Roberta was a hard female, feared in her own town. But here, she was just a cranky old woman, characteristics this sheriff apparently did not appreciate. "I don't know, nor do I care, who your uncle is. Here in Montana we live by Governor Norris's rules. I am his representative, and I doubt he'd want a lady to be separated from her children. Now, it sounds as though this lady has family in Dragonfly Creek, and these men mean to take her there. You will give them her things and be out of my town before the sun is high."

Roberta hissed and turned to her husband. "Carl, do something." He shot his wife a withering glance.

Lydia's heart felt so light she couldn't suppress a chuckle.

Roberta switched her glare from her husband to her ex-daughter-in-law.

The Skinners both climbed into the wagon and sat tall and stiff until Luc and Willem had unloaded all of Lydia's things onto the porch of the Cotton Falls Hotel. As soon as the last one left their wagon bed, Carl snapped the reins, and they were off at a trot. The dust from their wake blurred Lydia's view of Willem.

Luc came up the stairs with a small smile and a nod for Lydia before continuing into the hotel.

The dust cleared and Lydia saw Willem, leaning on one of her trunks, a silly look on his face like he was failing to hide a smile. “I see you finally found the time to ride your horse.”

Willem glanced at the mount and back to Lydia. “If I don’t bring you back, Della will have my hide.”

Lydia’s shoes echoed on the wooden porch as she went to him. He stood on the dirt and came only to her waist.

“I wouldn’t want you to be in trouble with your landlord,” Lydia said, “not after you banished Charles from your ranch.” She remembered how glad Willem had been to learn of Charles’ interest in the ranch. Of what Charles could offer the ranch’s reputation. “You needed his approval.”

Willem nodded, his smile faltering. “I did.” He ran his gaze over her as though checking over a horse before purchase. “Did he hurt you?”

She shook her head.

He scratched at the post of the porch. “Do you mean to return to Aster Ridge? Luc said you might go to Chicago.”

The hurt in his eyes told her he knew what moving to Chicago might mean.

She narrowed her eyes, trying to put her finger on what it was about this man that made him so dear to her. “How are you so different from Luc?”

Willem gave a hard laugh. “I’m not so different.”

Lydia stepped forward and brushed the backs of her fingers along his cheek before letting them fall to her sides once more. “You are *very* different.” His face was tanned from the sun and dust that followed him here, with little bursts of clean skin at the corners of his eyes where his squinting had protected the skin from the dirt of travel.

He closed his eyes at her touch and she wanted to make him do it again. “I’d like to go to Aster Ridge if you’ll take me. Is my job still available?”

Willem reached a hand and pulled at the back of his neck. “I’ll give you anything you want, Lydia.” He toed the ground.

His shy demeanor emboldened her. “Your horse?”

His eyes met hers, dancing the way they used to, before he’d begun to stress over his gentleman’s ranch. The way they had when she’d first come to Aster Ridge and his only goal was to draw a smile from her at every opportunity. He nodded.

“Your bunkhouse?” she tested, wanting him to eat his words.

He reached out and played with the hem of her dress. He nodded.

“You?”

His eyes flew to hers.

She held her breath, waiting to see what he wanted from her now that he knew she wanted everything.

In a swift movement he took her waist and pulled her to him spinning her in a circle. He set her feet on the ground and pressed his forehead to hers. His voice was hoarse as he whispered. “*Anything* you want.”

“I want it all.” She looked at him, waiting for him to realize what he’d promised. To remember what his ranch meant to him and all the reasons his family told him he couldn’t be married yet. Suddenly she feared he would realize just that. That his own worries and fears would take him from her again. “I want to live your dreams with you.”

“*You* are my dream.” He dipped his head and caught her lips, pulling her body closer to his as she surrendered to him.

Luc stepped out from the hotel and cleared his throat. “The kids are anxious to know you are safe. Your Milo is fierce.”

Lydia flicked her gaze back to Willem. “Someone has taught him that protecting his mother is the most important job a boy can have.”

They broke apart and the door to the hotel flew open behind Luc. Milo glanced up and down the street. “Are they gone? Those no-good sons of—”

“Milo!” Lydia chided. “Where did you learn such language?”

Bridget came out from behind Milo and ran toward Lydia, who lifted her off the porch.

Willem cleared his throat. “Milo, I must speak with you in private. Will you take a walk with me?”

Milo’s eyes widened as though he’d just realized Willem was there. “Okay.” His voice was tentative, as though he feared what was to come. He reached Willem’s side and the two took off toward the rising sun.

Lydia looked to Luc. “How did you get him here?”

“Willem?” He shrugged one shoulder. “It was all Slim. He can ride like the dickens. I would have gone myself, but I didn’t dare leave.”

Charles stepped out from behind Luc. “He didn’t trust me to keep you safe.”

A hard laugh broke out of Lydia’s chest. “I don’t blame him.”

Luc chuckled and slapped his friend on the back. “I trust you with many things. Women are not among them.”

Charles seemed unperturbed by the statement. Slim came around the corner, apparently having just taken care of his and Willem’s horses.

Lydia reached out a hand to him. “Thank you.” She tried to smile, but for some reason her lips quivered on the verge of crying.

He took her hand in both of his and bowed over her hand, pressing a kiss to her knuckles. "Anything for a lady so fine as yourself."

Lydia giggled. "You must charm all the ladies in Chicago."

The three exchanged glances, and Lydia realized they were missing one. "But where is Bennon?"

Luc laughed. "Still asleep, I presume."

Lydia smiled to think of the round man having missed such an adventure.

She turned to Luc. "You didn't need to get Willem. Between you, Slim, and Charles, the sheriff would have seen the right course."

Luc shook his head. "It wasn't because you needed him. He needed you. I'll never understand him. I tried to help him along in Chicago. Only, after I made the bet, I realized I didn't want him to win." Luc's eyes searched her face, and she knew then his feelings hadn't gone completely.

She winced. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry." Luc pulled away and called to his friends. "Shall we carry on to the warm beds of the women in Chicago?"

Lydia scoffed at his pivot. She knew better now. She'd seen a tenderness in him she never expected and likely few others saw. She hoped he showed it to Angelica and that it kept her happy through his selfish behaviors. A woman as sharp as Angelica would not miss the truth.

The men made their way to the coach that had taken them from Aster Ridge, and Lydia and Bridget sat on the pile of her possessions. They watched as Milo and Willem strolled closer.

"Papa," Bridget called, stretching her arms out.

"Oh, honey," Lydia said, still embarrassed by her daughter's confusion.

Willem and Milo strolled up the steps, and Willem reached out a hand to Lydia. She took it and he drew her up.

"Oh, let her call me papa already," Willem said.

Willem knelt before Lydia, taking her chin between his thumb and first finger. "Will you be my wife?"

Tears filled her eyes, and she nodded her head. Willem pressed his lips to hers and pulled away too soon.

She pulled her brows together. "You're sure?"

"I've never been more sure about anything."

He pulled her to him again and kissed her thoroughly.

"C'mon Bridget," Milo said. He took his sister's hand and left them to the privacy of the porch.



Epilogue



Lydia sat on the wagon seat next to Willem. For the moment, Bridget was entertained in her spot among the trunks with a newly purchased rag doll. The wagon Willem had purchased was old and weathered, but it would take her home and that was all that mattered. Milo sat astride Willem's tethered horse as it followed along with the wagon. The look on his face told Lydia he felt like king of the world on that beast.

She turned back to Willem, unabashedly staring at his profile. He was *hers*. The thought warmed her belly.

He glanced at her. His lips lifted in a smirk. "You know my mother will want a big Chicago wedding. Just like Ivete's."

Her stomach flipped. Willem's parents. They might make the same demands they had of Thomas and Ivete. They might expect Willem to take some time and consider Lydia's worthiness. "What if they take issue with me?"

Willem's face twitched as he flicked his gaze over her, taking all of her in. He shook his head. "They wouldn't dare."

Lydia huffed at his indifference. Had he decided familial acceptance wasn't the most important?

Willem gave a theatrical sigh. "If you wish, we can stop in the next town, find us a preacher, and let Milo be our witness."

Lydia took his arm and leaned her head against it. "I want your family there." As she said the words, she realized Willem's family was already her own. Della and Bastien. Ivete and Thomas. Luc. The thought of *him* made her empty stomach twist. She'd never closed the book on her and Willem's argument over Luc.

She looked up at him. "I never kissed him, you know. Luc. He—" "I know."

Lydia pulled back to better see his face. "Did he tell you?"

Willem shook his head as he watched the road. "I just ... know." Silence stretched as the wheels crunched along the dirt. "I know Luc. I know how diligent he can be. And I know you." Willems' shoulders raised and lowered in a sigh. "I know how important your children are to you. Know that if you'd harbored any feelings for Luc, you would have returned with him to Chicago. No doubt he offered you a house like our father has for his mistress. He's no novice when it comes to these things."

Lydia was stunned by his astute deduction of events. "He did. Offer me a house."

Willem's lips pressed into a line.

Lydia wished they were alone. That he was holding her as she spoke. "Even then, all I wanted was you."

He turned to her, his mouth lifted on one side and his eyes teasing. "You want the big Chicago wedding?"

Lydia raised her eyes to watch the white, puffy clouds as she thought. She knew it would bring Maxine joy. Knew, like Della, she'd have to participate in some type of affair in the city, whether it be the wedding, or a separate celebration. "I do."

Willem slapped the reins, inviting the animals to pick up their pace. "We'll send them the news before we go back to Aster Ridge."



LYDIA'S FEARS OF BEING rejected were assuaged when Maxine's reply came. It was not addressed to Willem but to Lydia. In it, Maxine requested Lydia come spend some time in Chicago. Attached to her letter was also a list of items for Lydia to decide on such as flowers and food for the banquet. Maxine's excitement radiated off the paper and infected Lydia. She smiled as she considered what blooms she would choose, her pulse humming with anticipation. Chicago. Again. But this time, with Willem by her side, not as a chaperone, but as her intended. There would be a party and they'd visit the bakery. And she'd try to make friends with Angelica again and ... there would be Luc. The thought of him dampened her excitement. To visit with Maxine, she'd have to return to Chicago alone, as Luc had requested. What would he think? Surely he'd know ...

She held the letter in her hands and walked to the grassy area behind Della's house. They kept the grass here trimmed and soft for the children. Willem lay on his back with Bridget straddling his chest and pulling on his nose. He jerked his nose from her little grip and snorted, earning a belly laugh from his soon-to-be daughter.

As Lydia drew nearer, Willem glanced at her, and a flicker of concern crossed his face. He lifted Bridget from her perch and sat up. "What is it?"

"Your mother sent me a letter." She lifted the folded parchment as proof.

"You? Or me?"

Lydia glanced toward the house then back to Willem. "I didn't even think to check if you had a message of your own. I suppose you do." She turned, but Willem caught the bottom of her skirt and tugged.

"Sit. Tell me about your letter. I can get mine later."

She handed him the letter and sat, arranging her skirts around her legs while he scanned his mother's words.

He looked at her over the paper. "Do you *want* to go to Chicago?"

The thought of spending time with Maxine and doing all the frilly things for a wedding brought a smile to her lips. "Yes."

"Do you mind if I come along?"

A sigh of relief whooshed from her lungs. "Please, do."

"You have but to ask, and I'd give you anything I can." He hooked a finger under her chin and pressed his lips to hers. His mouth was warm, and she leaned in, not wanting it to stop.

Willem pulled away, laughing. Bridget had his nose again, and he tugged her little body so she lay on the blanket while he tickled her sides. She squealed with laughter.

Lydia watched the two, not at all sad that her daughter had broken their kiss. Her children would disrupt far more than a single kiss, and to know Willem didn't mind, was more than she could ever have hoped for.

Willem stood and lifted Bridget onto his shoulders, his gaze swinging toward the house.

Eloise came out carrying Violet in her arms. She took Willem's seat and set Violet down between them. Eloise gave Violet a gentle poke in the belly. "This one is being trouble for her mama. I thought a bit of fresh air might stop all her fussing."

"The baby's fussing, or Della's?"

Eloise laughed. "Both." She leaned back, lifting her face to the bright Montana sun.

Lydia watched Willem run off and Bridget laughing with every bounce. She turned back and ran a hand over Violet's downy hair, looking at Eloise over the child's head. "How is Aaron?"

Eloise glanced at Ivete from the corner of her eye and spoke with a flat voice. "Still alive."

Lydia chuckled. "You seem disappointed."

Eloise sighed. "I know it's a sin to wish someone dead. And I don't. I just wish him out of my house." She stopped sunning herself and met Lydia's stare. "The better he gets, the more enamored everyone becomes. I don't understand why they love a man such as him."

"Having never met him, I can't say. Shall I assume you're not inclined to feel any of that love?"

"No." Eloise ducked her chin in disgust. "Once he's up and back to his lawless ways, they'll all see I'm right."

"Ivete told me Aaron is done thieving. That he's here for the remainder of his time on this earth. We have a nice little hideaway here. He might live longer than he thinks. I don't think any bounty hunter will approach a random ranch, not unless someone points him

in our direction.”

“I might, if my pa wasn’t so keen on him.” Eloise shook her head. “He’d never forgive me.”

“There you have it. Let the man live his days in obscurity. He’ll be out of your home soon enough.”

Eloise nodded, but her face looked like she’d just sucked on a lemon. She glanced at the letter on the blanket. “What does Chicago say about your engagement?”

Lydia grinned. “She wants me to come out and help plan the wedding. You’re going to love it there. It’s like a fairy world. All white-gloved servants and sparkling chandeliers. You’ll lose your calluses, but it’s worth every crack upon your return.”

“Oh.” Eloise’s face fell. “I can’t leave Mama. She needs me too much.” She brightened, taking Lydia’s hands and giving them a squeeze, “But I demand you write down every detail and bring it home. Promise me?”

Lydia stared at her friend, torn between begging her to come and understanding Eloise’s devotion to her family. The last thing she wanted was to tarnish Eloise’s commitment to her mother and father. “I won’t pressure you, but you must promise that you’ll tell me if you have the slightest inclination to go. I’ll do whatever I can to make the arrangements.”

“I promise.”

Bridget laughed, drawing both their gazes.

Eloise’s voice was soft. “He’s a good one, isn’t he?”

“He sure is.”

As though summoned by their words, Willem came back and put Bridget on her feet next to Violet. “Mind if I leave my daughter here a moment? I want a word with my almost wife.”

“As you please,” Eloise said with a chuckle.

Willem offered Lydia a hand and lifted her to her feet. He tugged her off behind the house until they were hidden from view in a shaded corner.

“Your daughter?” Lydia asked.

He shrugged. “She’s yours, and you’re mine.” He leaned against the house and pulled her to him. “Are you sure you don’t want to elope? We can still go to Chicago and have the fancy party.”

Lydia chuckled, but shook her head. “Your mother would be crushed. She longs to spoil another bride as she spoiled Ivete.”

Willem growled and set his forehead against hers. “Please don’t talk of my mother right now.”

His breath was hot against her lips. She lifted onto her toes to press her mouth to his. His hold on her tightened, while something in his lips softened. As though her kiss had both soothed and provoked his

need for her.

She pressed her palms flat against his chest. "I'm not your wife yet, Mr. Graham."

"Only because of the law. In here" — he put a hand on top of hers, over his heart— "you already are."

She went to him again, letting him hold her and kiss her. After all, she was no fair maiden who didn't know what to expect on her wedding night.



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I want to thank my mom for being a warrior. She taught me that mother's don't give up, they somehow make it through circumstances much more real and difficult than the ones I imagined for Lydia. I struggle to write books with mothers as good as my own. This is because with a woman like her on the team, there is no conflict. With her, everything works out and I know that isn't coincidence. It also makes for a short story, and I write novels. I love you, Mom.

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About the Author

Kate Condie is a speed talker from Oregon. Reading has been part of her life since childhood, where she devoured everything from mysteries, to classics, to autobiographies—and of course, romance. At first, her writing was purely in journal format as she thought writing novels was for the lucky ones. She lives in Utah and spends her days surrounded by mountains with her favorite hunk, their four children and her laptop. In her free time she reads, tries to learn a host of new instruments, binge watches anything by BBC or tries to keep up with Lafayette as she sings the Hamilton soundtrack.